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**Motivational and Situational  
Discourses  
in  
Collective Community Action**

**A thesis submitted for the degree of**

**Doctor of Education**

**School of Education  
University of Durham**

**15 MAY 2008**

**Ilona Buchroth**

**2007**



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## **Abstract**

This thesis is concerned with attempting to understand the contemporary motivation and conditions for collective community action.

This study is based on interviews with 20 people who are active in their local community in the North East of England. It explores the rationale behind their commitment to the 'common good' and identifies the circumstances and conditions that support, shape and develop that commitment.

The study is of particular current interest and also highlights contemporary tensions. On the one hand current government policy, especially in the areas of renewal and regeneration, relies heavily on the active involvement of local people, both in the areas of decision making at strategic level and through an increase in community and voluntary sector activity. On the other hand however, society is generally described as displaying features of what some may term the 'post-modern' condition, that is a mind-set defined primarily through an increase in individualism, an absence of collective values and a tendency 'to bowl alone' (Putnam 2000). This tendency is reflected in the changes to adult education, which has been increasingly individualised and therefore no longer provides the pathways to collective involvement that used to be part of its radical tradition.

The findings from this study challenge the prevailing assumptions of apathy, inactivity and individualism and show the very broad range of reasons that motivate people of different ages and backgrounds to become and remain active with others. Furthermore, this study outlines the conditions that are likely for this engagement to flourish, to take it beyond a remedial, temporary 'life style' option and instead to allow it to take root as a sustainable and transformative contribution to local neighbourhoods.

## **Introduction**

The rationale for this thesis is related to a range of seemingly conflicting developments within social policy theory and adult education: there is a growing political and policy interest in community engagement, volunteering and citizenship at a time when it is suggested that society is characterised by the impact of post modernity, which makes people less inclined to seek collective solutions. Furthermore adult education, historically regarded as one of the main conduits of collective action and transformation, appears to have lost its own radical agenda and to have been subsumed into servicing a wide range of government objectives. As a result adult education is now concentrating primarily on the achievements and employability skills of individuals, thus no longer providing the original pathways and conditions for collective approaches. However as a practising community / adult education worker I have been witnessing the sustained, active engagement of people who are seeking collective solutions to identified issues, despite the unfavourable conditions outlined above. The relevant literature and corresponding academic debate offers only partial explanations for what motivates and supports these

people in their activism. This thesis therefore seeks to explore the background and circumstances of the lived reality of community activism within a contemporary context.

## **Overview of the thesis**

Chapter 1 of this thesis first outlines the policy context that has shaped the relevant literature and academic debate. It then shows how research into adult education, as well as the growing interest into citizenship and social capital, has made some contribution to understanding the motivation and circumstances of collective community action and indicates the areas that need further investigation and how these have shaped the research questions.

Chapter 2 sets out the methodological underpinnings for this exploratory study and the methods that were employed to collect and analyse the research data. Specifically, this chapter covers reflections on reliability and credibility of qualitative research using case studies, ethical issues that arise from conducting interviews, negotiating access and consent and thoughts on some of the limitations and concerns that may arise from narrative enquiry.

Chapters 3, 4 and 5 present the findings from the research. Chapter 3 outlines the motivational disposition for people's community activism with particular reference to the perceived personal benefits, the pathways that have led to community involvement and the theoretical underpinnings that people have used to explain their activism.

Chapter 4 concentrates on the conditions for people's community activism, in particular what kinds of resources respondents had available and how they reflected on the impact their involvement had.

Chapter 5 synthesises the findings of chapters 3 and 4 and demonstrates how motivational dispositions interact with the conditions available and shape both the nature and extent of community activism.

Chapter 6 summarises the main findings of the research, outlines their relevance to current community /adult education practice and highlights the implications and tensions arising for policy and practice.

## **Chapter 1      Literature in Context**

### ***Overall Context***

It is difficult to look at past research without first looking at the context that has shaped and is currently shaping the discourses on adult education and the related areas of informal education, citizenship and civic engagement. It can be argued that the writing of adult educators in the broadest sense, as result of the developments of 1980s and 90s in particular, is now less pursuing its own agenda but is more reacting to challenges that have arisen from the current policy agenda and a resulting dominant discourse that concentrates primarily on the employability skills of what is considered to be an under-qualified workforce. It will be shown that in attempting to understand the lived realities, motivational dispositions and conditions for collective community action, both the literature following the dominant discourse and the literature in response to it, offers useful theoretical starting points, but also leaves considerable empirical gaps.

### **Context 1    The effects of post-modernity and growing individualism**

1. Post-modernity, although a much contested concept, has become an area of academic debate and permeates a wide range of disciplines, suggesting that “the trajectory of social development is taking us away from the institutions of modernity towards a new and distinct type of social order” (Giddens 1990:46). What has become important here is the celebration of difference without the ‘grand narratives’, i.e. the unifying ways of maintaining and explaining a presumed, shared culture. The resulting fragmentation is

characterised by a definition of knowledge in terms of its utility value and a growing emphasis on individualised perspectives. The latter in particular is the focus of the work of Robert Putnam (2000) whose extensive study in the United States has shown how people have become increasingly disconnected from one another and how as a result social structures have disintegrated. In Britain, individualism as part of a dominant neo-liberal ideology has become particularly associated with the 1980s and 90s and Margaret Thatcher's much quoted assertion that "there is no such thing as society, only the individual and his (sic) family". Consequently the dominant discourse has developed around concerns for individual rights and choice, rather than solidarity and collective bonds.

## **Context 2    Citizenship and Social Capital**

Current central government policy increasingly relies on the active engagement of citizens; correspondingly the Home Office Public Service Agreement Target (Home office 2001) aimed to increase voluntary and community sector activity, including community participation, by 5% by 2006 (Home Office 2001).

Not only is there an increasing reference to the efficiency and effectiveness issues that arise from neighbourhood participation, as services designed by people who have "limited understanding or no direct experience of issues and circumstances" can have "serious consequences.... resulting in taxpayers' money being wasted" (National Audit Office 2004:4), but there is also an increase in references to social capital, social inclusion and cohesion and other benefits of voluntary activity in the community such as

“better health, lower crime, improved educational performance and greater life satisfaction” (DOPM 2005:9).

As the demand for welfare increases and the willingness to contribute to it through paying higher taxes diminishes, the policy interest in people entering into a social contract with each other becomes particularly important (Pattie et al 2004). Active involvement in community affairs, including volunteering, is also therefore increasingly viewed in terms of its potential contribution to the provision of welfare.

As a result, Social Capital Theory has risen to particular prominence within the past decade, is regarded to be a cornerstone of the ‘Third Way’ thinking of the Blair government (Gamarnikow and Green 1999) and firmly embedded in the thinking underlying government policies on education and renewal. ‘Third way thinking’ seems to be designed to provide an alternative and antidote to social fragmentation and social exclusion and aims to re-address concepts of a civil society against a back-drop of what can be termed the ‘post modern condition’ (Lyotard 1984).

### **Context 3 Adult Education and the “New Vocationalism”**

Historically, collective community activism is rooted in the broad arena of the radical tradition of adult education and learning and is therefore also closely linked to issues of equality and social justice and learning for transformation. These issues and the related concepts of mutuality, solidarity and associational engagement have traditionally been

key aspects of adult education theory and practice in Britain and are principally shaped by

- Eduard Lindeman and John Dewey's shared concern with democracy, associations and experiential learning, further supported by the writing of David Kolb, Jack Mezirow.
- The development of groupwork and theories of self directed learning primarily advocated by Malcolm Knowles and Stephen Brookfield.
- The Marxist tradition, critical theory and critical pedagogy, concerned with liberation and transformation – for example in the writing of Paulo Freire, Antonio Gramsci, Ivan Illich.
- Adult education's link to social and political movements, in particular the labour movement, peace movement, environmental movement and the women's movement.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a marked change in the development of adult education. The dominance of the "New Vocationalism" of the 1980s, as fostered and supported by a succession of conservative governments, has left a distinct mark on what is desirable and obtainable in the education of adults and had destroyed the remnants of both the liberal and radical tradition in adult education. The Further/Higher Education Act 1992 and the resulting funding criteria as administered by the Further Education Funding Council (FEFC) focused primarily on training and re-training an under-skilled British work-force that was considered to be unable to compete on international markets. In 1988<sup>1</sup> the government regarded a skill shortage as a greater problem facing the country than

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<sup>1</sup> See Government White Papers: 'Training for Employment', 'Employment in the 1990s'



unemployment. As a result the main policy thrust was on employability skills and making British workers more competitive on international markets.

"The Learning Age, a renaissance for a new Britain", was the title with which the Government published its Green Paper on Lifelong Learning in 1998. The Paper formed much of the basis for the government's vision of a 'learning society', i.e. to develop a 'culture of lifelong learning for all'. The government saw this as a 'formidable challenge' which 'requires every part of the education and training system to make its contribution' (DfEE 1998d:45). The publication of the White Paper "Learning to Succeed" in 1999 provided a new framework for post 16 learning, outlining the government's 'vision for the new millennium', 'to build a new culture of learning which will underpin national competitiveness and personal prosperity, encourage creativity and innovation and help build a cohesive society'. Lifelong Learning therefore is portrayed to have the capacity to address a very wide range of social and economic issues and forms the central strategy to many of Britain's perceived problems - from achieving economic competitiveness to fostering social cohesion.

As a result of the utilitarian focus of government policy, the 'post modern condition' and the neo-liberal mindset focusing on choice and free enterprise is reflected in the development of adult education. Allman and Wallis (1995) claim that the post modern condition denies the universal values and goals which used to be the constituent elements of a radical vision in adult education; instead people are more encouraged to focus on "pluralistic aspirations derived from difference" (Allman and Wallis 1995:25). Similarly,

there is the potential that assumed and shared aspects of lifestyle and the “social world of commodities” (Allman and Wallis 1995:26) form the sole basis of commonality and social engagement. The lack of coherence resulting from a celebration of diversity and fragmentation erodes concepts such as ‘truth’ and ‘humanity’ as any person’s perception and interpretation of the world becomes as valid and as legitimate as another. Some features of the post-modern condition therefore can become very problematic for radical adult educators and political activists and “if not challenged could mean the end of any possibility of radicalism, critical intelligence and vision of a better future for the whole of humanity” (Allman and Wallis 1995:26).

### ***Review of the literature***

Collective activism is closely related to issues of power and inequality and a commitment to transformation it is also rooted in the radical tradition of adult educators. The starting point, and the first strand of this literature review therefore, is examining contemporary writing on adult education. As will be shown below, the academic debate is largely determined by a reaction to the current policy context surrounding lifelong learning.

On the one hand there are those whose writing supports the dominant discourse as set out by the context described above and who have largely reacted positively to the new context and the challenges and opportunities it can bring. In accommodating these new challenges the discourse of liberation and social transformation has been predominantly exchanged for one that concentrates on market forces, employability and individual advancement. In this process learning has been privatised and instrumentalised; issues of

inequality have been absorbed into a concern for access and widening participation. On the other hand there are 'dissenting' voices, including those who offer critical perspectives on the policy context and who are attempting to re-establish collective concerns and promote informal education. These strands of the literature then also need to link with the emergence of a renewed interest in citizenship, and the contribution of volunteering in a diverse range of concepts of developing a 'civil' society.

### **Adult Education – within the current policy context**

Given the focus on employability and economic competitiveness, one of the most prominent issues arising from developments in the 1980s was a concern about non participation in adult learning. During the 1980s issues regarding disadvantage and non participation were primarily related to those of unemployed adults. The (then) Department of Education and Science's REPLAN Programme, in conjunction with the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE), published a wide range of reports and research findings relating to the particular needs of unemployed and unwaged people (Charnley et al 1985, Johnston 1987, Fraser and Ward 1988)<sup>2</sup>, analysing particular kinds of measures and offering practical guidance aimed at involving people who are out of work in ongoing education and training. There was a plethora of work that tended to treat excluded groups as a homogenous entity, although writers such as Kirkwood and Griffiths (1984) also started to focus on the very complex set of issues that unemployed people, and indeed other marginalized groups, bring to the educational agenda. Similarly, Barbara Senior and John Naylor (1987:106) criticise the prevailing

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<sup>2</sup> 'Education for the Adult Unemployed', 'Exploring the Educational Needs of Unwaged Adults', 'Education from Everyday Living – Community based courses with Unemployed People'

concept that “something is wrong with the condition of unemployment and [that] there needs to be a cure” and instead advocate not just developing individuals’ abilities but to foster collective approaches to bringing about change in individuals as well as within society.

In the 1990s the issues surrounding non participation continued to be prominent and influenced much of the writing related to the newly formed term of ‘widening participation’. Levels of participation in post 16 learning, according to a survey conducted by the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education (NIACE) in 1996, confirmed that participation in learning was considered to be low. These findings were supported both by the National Adult Learning Survey (ALS) (1997) and the MORI survey into attitudes to learning which confirmed that participation rates were not evenly distributed and particularly low for certain groups. This was compounded by the publication of the Kennedy Report a year later which was commissioned by the (then) Further Education Funding Council (FEFC). The Kennedy Report confirmed that there was a significant problem with participation rates in adult learning, but furthermore that certain groups in society were much more likely to take part in adult learning than others and that there are groups in society which were dramatically under-represented and/or are under-achieving in adult learning. These groups include people from some minority ethnic groups and refugees, people from low income groups, people with physical and learning disabilities, people without qualifications and those out of work.

In order to realise the vision of a 'learning society' it was not sufficient to increase the number of learners, but some closer scrutiny was necessary as to the kinds of people adult learning could attract. The Kennedy Report recommended that "public policy for post-compulsory learning must be dramatically and consistently redirected towards widening, rather than simply increasing participation and achievement" (FEFC 1997a: 22). Hence it was 'more and different adults' which became the dominant concern. The resulting discourse and literature fell roughly into three different, but interrelated, categories (Edwards 1997):

Firstly, attempts are being made to attract a different kind of learner, i.e. widening participation, as opposed to increasing participation. The emphasis here lies with attempting to remove the perceived practical barriers to participation as they affect in particular those groups who are under-represented in adult learning. As a result the literature of the 80s, which was mainly concerned with unemployed/unwaged adults, was significantly extended to include a wider range of non-participating adults, in line with those groups highlighted in the Kennedy Report, such as working with black adult learners (Dadzie 1993a, White 2002), deaf and hard of hearing adults (Jones 1993), ethnic minority elders (Dadzie 1993), young adults not participating in formal education and training (Jackson 2003). Similarly, there is no shortage of suggestions of how to engage learners from disadvantaged backgrounds (McGivney 1990, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002, Thompson 2001, 2002).

Secondly there is a discourse that is concerned with changing the parameters of learning and that placed the emphasis on learning providers to offer a more flexible range of programmes, for example through developing coherent accreditation frameworks, e-learning and distance learning, funding for Adult Learners, supported by high profile, national initiatives such as the University for Industry / Learn Direct, Individual Learning Accounts.

Thirdly there is a discourse which centres on power and powerlessness and which looks at participation and non participation within a wider socio-economic context and introduces a political dimension to the participation/non participation debate. (McGivney 1990, 1999, 2000, 2001, 2002; Thompson 2001, 2002). Some of the recurring findings highlight the importance of informal learning using participatory models, the need for confidence building, entry and pre-entry level provision, local provision, and also refer to the many cultural and attitudinal barriers that affect non-participation. McGivney however also draws attention to more than instrumental barriers and highlights how issues of powerlessness and systemic marginalisation are key aspects to address as part of a widening participation strategy. Although this debate highlights many of the issues that are relevant to this study, as it gives useful insights into areas of motivational dispositions, its focus nevertheless remains on individual advancement rather than on pursuing collective concerns.

Despite some initial indications that the government might adopt a wider definition of what constitutes learning and what the respective benefits could be, these were overtaken

by a distinct narrowing of the curriculum which again was again concentrating on employability skills and Basic Skills. To counteract this many writers sought to draw attention to the wider benefits that learning can have.<sup>3</sup>

The Centre for Research on the Wider Benefits of Learning in particular published a wide range of research projects attempting to capture some of the complexities surrounding the interaction of learning and life. For example Preston & Hammond (2002) and Schuller et al (2002) demonstrate how learning outcomes which on the surface could be interpreted as leading to individual benefit have a wider positive effect on society as a whole, as they affect individuals, their families and changes in aspiration. Schuller et al (2002) offer a two-dimensional matrix to capture the effects of learning: from 'individual' to 'collective' and from 'sustaining' to 'transforming'. Although the transformative aspects of learning are often more visible, the sustaining elements play a vital role in the general 'health' of individuals and communities (2002:12). Similar sentiments are expressed by Veronica McGivney (1999) who outlines that informal education in particular, albeit not favoured by policy makers and funders, can have a significant impact on individuals and their families; it often provides a pathway to formal learning and, more importantly, has a role to play in contributing to neighbourhood renewal and regeneration.

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<sup>3</sup> The impact of learning on health is a particular focus of a number of studies. Dench and Regan (1999) concluded their study that there is evidence that a high proportion of adults benefit from learning in terms of their well being. More detailed evidence can be found in Aldridge and Lavender (2000) where the majority of respondents reported benefits to their physical well-being as a result of their participation in adult learning.

As outlined in the context above, lifelong learning became a flagship concept of the government in the late 1990s and many writers shared a broad vision of lifelong learning and a certain enthusiasm for it and thus embarked on practical guidance on how to implement a 'Learning Society'. Smith and Spurling (1999) set out to outline the parameters for creating an expansive infrastructure to create a culture of learning, to show how [Lifelong Learning] "can become the central operational concept in the management of radical change in the UK Learning system" (1999:3). Longworth (1999, 2003) sees lifelong learning as a new approach to education, training, the economy and society. He particularly promotes the development of Learning Cities and learning communities and outlines structural needs and requirements, emphasising the sustained support through new technologies (1999). Despite the terminology that is suggesting a more collective approach, what is shared amongst these writers is a concern with individual pathways to learning, and learning within community settings rather than developing communities of learning.

## **Dissenting Voices**

In reaction to the largely positive response to the perceived new challenges to adult learning there is a competing discourse that is taking a critical stance as not all writers share the general enthusiasm for the Learning Society. The rhetoric surrounding lifelong learning remains undefined and is generally attributable to a plethora of different ambitions. Frank Coffield (1997) views the Learning Society as a contested and multi-dimensional concept. Ranson (1998) regards the term as being very imprecisely defined as the discourse generally encompasses three quite separate dimensions, i.e. learning for



work, citizenship and democracy. Christina Hughes and Malcolm Tight (1998) go one step further and claim that the idea of the Learning Society has no current empirical validity in the UK and that it is primarily based on a set of interrelating myths relating to the link between productivity and change and their resulting myths of lifelong education, learning organisations and the learning society. They regard these myths as an inadequate basis for understanding very complex relationships. The mythical status associated with these terms however also means that they do not get scrutinised sufficiently to be of much value for policy development (1998:179-188).

Young and Raffe (in Coffield 1997) distinguish four different models of a learning society – the first three relating to increasing participation in full time compulsory education, increasing the proportion of people with qualifications and increasing access to education and training seem to be favoured by current government policy. The fourth encourages a reflexive perspective to embrace a more holistic view of learning “as a major feature of all social relationships, personal, organisational and societal” to “enable British society to learn about itself” (Coffield 1997). Accordingly, one of the main starting points Coffield suggests is to explore who currently participates, who does not and what the determinants of participation and non-participation are. These themes are further developed by writers who advocate a transformational view of adult learning, such as Mayo (1997), Thompson (2001), and Tett (2002).

What emerges however from these debates is a need for empirical work since, as Rees et al (1997) point out, much of the discourse has a normative focus, in that it is concerned with what there ought to be and a future destination which we may or may not reach.

Field (2000:104) claims that Lifelong Learning, although generally presented as increasing opportunities, especially for those who are deemed disadvantaged, can actually create new inequalities and entrench existing ones. He sees this happening for a number of reasons: on the one hand there are fewer opportunities for those who are regarded as unskilled whilst there are greater expectations with regard to people's literacy, numeracy and mobility. On the other hand there is a new politics of poverty and social exclusion which also legitimises inequalities. The latter is particularly prominent due to the individualisation that also places the responsibility for learning and non participation as well as the resulting social consequences into the hands of individuals.

Frank Coffield (1999) regards the lack of democracy and the coercive elements of the new rhetoric of lifelong learning as a new form of social control. Similarly, Alexander and Martin (1995) refer to a "new pedagogy of labour" which puts the power of education and its outcomes in the hands of employers and business which they regard as both an undemocratic and anti-democratic trend. It is here what Frank Coffield (1997) refers to as the conflict between the "economic imperative" and the "democratic imperative" becomes most apparent.

### **Re-establishing collective concerns**

One of the main criticisms made against the current discourse on widening participation and lifelong learning is that of the predominantly individual approach to what are actually collective and systemic issues within society. Jane Thompson (2001), concerned with the

relationship between lifelong learning, neighbourhood renewal and regeneration, consistently draws attention to the limitations of a discourse that is concerned with individual achievement and progression. "Those who make it up the ladder and out of poverty do not materially change anything for those, the majority of their fellows, who are left behind" (2001:35). Accordingly, community learning, in addition to widening participation and developing a local skill base, also needs to address collective concerns and "reclaim social purpose". Jane Thompson (2001) further outlines how groups targeted for widening participation are often portrayed as 'deficient' individuals who are in need of intervention of some kind or other. This emphasis on deficiency does not build on the existing strength of learners and therefore does not effectively utilise the many skills which currently exist within communities. In many ways this individualised approach is also a legacy from particularly the 1980s where the dominant discourse in education was concerned with individual choice with a firm commitment to a market model. In adult education the community development approaches focusing on collective action were increasingly replaced by attempts to find individual solutions to public problems. Society seems to be regarded as an aggregation of individuals without due regard to common bonds, common struggles and therefore "translates aspirations for democratic renewal and critical engagement with political processes into issues of self-fulfilment, confidence building, consumer choice, employability and volunteering" (Thompson 2001:11). This is further compounded by an increasing emphasis on individualized learning methods, heavily supported by the use of Information Technology. Brookfield clearly outlines how 'self directed learning' which has the capacity to change perspectives and affect the interpretation of the world, has been

replaced by 'independent study' which is primarily concerned with instructional design and applying techniques of resource location "within the context of goals and criteria determined by an external authority" (1986:19). Accordingly, 'community learning' has become synonymous with providing localised, but largely individualised opportunities for learning rather than promoting collective approaches to issues that are arising from local communities.

Similarly, Alexander and Martin highlight how the sustained interest in a competence based curriculum and assessment, for example, reflects the focus on the management of economic decline where "public issues are transmuted into personal troubles [and] structural contradictions into social pathology" (Alexander and Martin 1995:83).

Furthermore, the current dominant discourse places responsibility for lifelong learning firmly on the individual 'to develop their own learning, careers, by making use of the opportunities made available to them.'<sup>4</sup> Again, for Ragatt et al (1996), Coffield (1997, 1999) and Field (2000) issues arise here about the potential restriction of choice and liberty of those individuals who, for one reason or other, do not want to avail themselves of these opportunities.

### **Informal Education and the remnants of the radical tradition**

Throughout the 80s and 90s there has been a complementary discourse, mainly maintained by those writers who have tried to retain a radical vision of adult education

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<sup>4</sup> Cologne Charter: Aims and Ambitions for Lifelong Learning (1999) G8 Summit, Cologne).

(and/or lifelong learning). The main focus is a fundamental disagreement with the narrow vision that is masked by the seemingly all embracing term of 'lifelong learning'. As such they share a concern with learning for transformation, and collective action. Much of the writing on radical adult education in the 1980s and 90s has forged links between the theory of adult education and the social struggles and political movements in other countries (McLaren and Lankshear 1994, Walter and Manicom 1996, Mayo 1997, Foley 1999), as in an increasingly globalised context parallels are drawn between the conditions in Britain and developing countries. The main thrust behind the 'residual' and newly emerging radical tradition concentrates on the potential for transformation that is inherent in a wider approach adult learning and in particular informal learning, especially as it questions some of the 'grand narratives' surrounding notions of 'development' (Mayo 1997, Hughes and Tight 1998, Finger and Asun 2001).

There is a great emphasis on not viewing informal learning as an inferior version to formal learning and that the position of informal learning ought to be fundamentally reassessed, both in its capacity to contribute to wider policy agendas (Tett 2002, Thompson 2001, 2002) but also in terms of fostering a more democratic approach that resists the instrumentalisation and exploitation of informal learning (Coffield 2000).

Writers on informal education have consistently highlighted the potential arising from a rich associational life, not only as a site for learning, but also as the 'practice ground' for democracy, and also to promote values such as tolerance and mutuality (Smith 1994, 1999, 2000, 2001; Elsdon et al 1995). Writers like Tony Jeffs and Mark Smith (1988, 1994,

1996, 1999), drawing on the writing of radical tradition in adult education, provide a blueprint and the theoretical basis for collective action, particularly for those working within the community and youth work/ community development field. It is in the writing of informal educators that the processes rather than the outcomes are the main focus. Much of the emphasis here is on group-work, an analysis of power and knowledge and the crucial role of dialogue in informal education<sup>5</sup>. Running through Jeffs' and Smith's writing is a commitment to local democracy, and, most importantly, informed and committed action (Praxis) as the central outcome of informal/local education. Informal, 'local', education therefore is clearly theorised as a collective activity that contextualises learning for wider, collective benefit. Central to this form of education are underlying values. For Jeffs and Smith (1990, 1996), (Smith 1994) these are based on Aristotle's 'practical wisdom', guided by what makes for "human well-being" (Smith 1994:76). Accordingly, informal education is regarded by Jeffs and Smith as a "moral craft" (1996:80), based on personal values and 'core' or first order values which are shared and debated amongst professionals. These include respect for people, the promotion of well-being, truth, democracy, fairness and equality (Jeffs & Smith 1996:81).

This reference to underlying core values opens up another dimension to the debate and also suggests a link to this study. Although the dominant adult education discourse relating to vocational objectives did not incorporate 'values' as part of the curriculum, the new government agenda relating to neighbourhood renewal places values at the heart of its learning and skills strategy.<sup>6</sup> And, as has been outlined above, values play a particular role in the pursuit of collective endeavours, the absence of which Bagnall (1999) regards

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<sup>5</sup> They draw significantly on the writing of Gadamer, Freire, Habermas,

<sup>6</sup> See the 'Learning Curve 2002 Neighbourhood Renewal Unit 2002 *The Learning Curve: Developing Skills and Knowledge for Neighbourhood Renewal*, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister

as an essential feature of post-modernity and are generally viewed as potentially problematic<sup>7</sup> (Alman and Wallis 1995, Usher, Bryant and Johnston 1997, Finger and Asun 2001).

## **Citizenship, social capital and volunteering**

Corresponding to the concern with values, there is a renewed focus on citizenship, covering a wide range of contemporary concerns, such as people's decreasing interest and lack of belief in democratic processes, declining electoral turnout and a general lack of trust in and commitment to local communities. The concepts surrounding citizenship therefore not only feature in academic debates but are of increasing interest to policy makers because of the kinds of social and economic problems that the civic renewal agenda is attempting to address. The concept of 'civil society' has therefore become central to a wide range of publicly funded research projects, for example Haste (2005) exploring young people's civic action or Pattie et al (2002, 2004), as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's 'Democracy and Participation' programme undertaking an extensive survey mapping the foundations for citizenship in Britain. Their approach to the research is particularly helpful for narrowing the very broad range of concepts that surround the notion of citizenship in common usage to two dimensions, i.e. attitudinal and behavioural. The attitudinal dimension attempts to capture people's perceptions of their rights and obligations to wider society whereas the attitudinal dimension looks at whether and how people actually participate in civil society and democratic processes (Pattie et al 2004:129).

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<sup>7</sup> as indeed some of the concepts relating to 'praxis' as outlined by Jeffs and Smith above

Citizenship itself is a contested concept and has generated a plethora of writing reflecting a particular and renewed interest in the past decade. The literature corresponds to the two main traditions in the approach to citizenship – the liberal and the civic republican. The former is primarily concerned with (individual) possession of rights, whereas the latter concentrates on the commitment and contributions to wider communities and the associated obligations. Much of the writing associated with the liberal tradition relates to concerns about people's participation in political processes, in particular electoral turnout and these have not been pursued for this study, unless they made a link with the associated values and beliefs in the wider context of the development of a civil society (Pattie et al 2004, Beierlein and Preiser 2005).

Both traditions, however not usually referred to in classical theories of citizenship, are potentially overlaid with issues relating to equality, exclusion and power (Batsleer and Humphries 2000; Coare and Johnston 2003, Dwyer 2004; Lister 1990, 2003), as the allocation of rights and the opportunities to act upon them can be used as powerful exclusionary devices. In challenging the prevailing definitions Ruth Lister (2003:38) uses the concept of “human agency” to outline the dynamic relationship between the two traditions, as in “defining citizenship we are seeking the conditions which will enable participation in the political sphere and therefore enable us to act as subjects and agents in our own lives, and not as passive objects of the charity of others” (Batsleer and Humphries 2000:14).



Adult educators have also sought to re-establish the contribution of adult educators in the development of the citizenship agenda and have thus also attempted to re-connect learning for citizenship with the traditions of adult education (Johnston 2003). Coare and Johnston explore the role of adult educators in promoting learning for citizenship and build on an extended definition of citizenship, whilst incorporating many of the main features that are commonly associated with informal education, such as a negotiated curriculum, fostering collective identities and a common purpose and promoting social learning (2003:207). Although their conclusions have been based on a number of practice based perspectives, including those from marginalised groups, their writing remains largely aspirational, as Coare and Johnston themselves highlight the need to resolve the tension between what as adult educators, “we are required to do and what we wish to do” (2003:219).

The discourse of citizenship is related to the concept of social capital that has been added to social theory in the past 25 years and has achieved a similar prominence. Elements of the theoretical concepts surrounding social capital have featured in earlier writings of, most notably, Mark Granovetter (1973), Pierre Bourdieu (1983) and James Coleman (1988). However, Crossley (2005) suggests that the portrayal of the decline of social capital, as well as the social problems associated with it, are a re-invention of older sociological ideas, based on Durkheim’s concept of ‘anomie’ and Habermas’ “colonisation of the life-world”, i.e. an erosion of social structures due to the intervention of the state into an increasing number of areas of human life (Habermas 1987). Nevertheless it is the writing of David Putnam (1993, 1995, 2000) that appears to have

elicited the wide-spread and popular response to social capital theory. As outlined earlier, social capital thinking has permeated a wide range of current policy initiatives but also features prominently in academic writing and research linking social capital to outcomes in a broad range of areas, such as education, health, community safety and economic growth. And yet the concept appears to remain very loosely defined and to have acquired a number of different, partially contradictory and ambiguous meanings. Common to the work of Coleman and Putnam is a reference to “norms, trust and networks”, albeit from a different perspective. James Coleman, as a rational choice theorist, regards networks as part of an individual’s resource that, although being derived from belonging to a social system, can be activated for individual benefit. Putnam, starting from the perspective of the networks, views norms, trust and networks as the essential pr-requisites for a flourishing infrastructure that allows communities to prosper (2000).<sup>8</sup> Generally, social capital is categorised into three different forms: ‘bonding’, ‘bridging’ and ‘linking’ (Gilchrist 2004). ‘Bonding’ in this context refers to the links that groups develop amongst themselves, ‘bridging’ refers to links between groups and ‘linking’ captures the relationships that go beyond peer boundaries and immediate spheres of influence. Most of the literature portrays social capital in a positive light and there is generally little recognition that social capital can have negative as well as positive outcomes (Woodcock and Narayan 2000), as, for instance, strong bonds within groups can create insider and outsider scenarios and the trust within groups can increase mistrust and exclusion of others.

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<sup>8</sup> Based on a comparison of Northern and Southern Italy Putnam suggests that it is the extent of civic association and voluntary engagement, based on norms of trust and reciprocity, i.e. the extent of social capital, that underlies the relative success of the North (1993).

Although Putnam's work has attracted considerable controversy and criticism (Fine 2001, McLean et al 2002), it is his claim that social capital is declining (2000) that is most enduring and provides the focus for a sustained interest in, both academically and in policy terms, how to halt or reverse this decline.<sup>9</sup> The current prominence of the interest in volunteering, as an extension of the citizenship debate referred to above, can be viewed within this context of reversing the decline. There is little academic debate about the nature of volunteering in its own right, but volunteering forms one of the aspects of either the research into citizenship or is the focus of a number of national policy developments and government strategy. As such there is a broad range of interest in extending volunteering to a more diverse group of people or highlighting the extensive range of benefits that volunteering is expected to bring to the development of individuals or the benefit of communities. The Institute for Volunteering Research has been commissioned by the government to undertake a very wide range of projects drawing attention to the link between volunteering and a plethora of social issues, such as mental health (2003) and reducing social exclusion (2004). In addition, there is focused interest by central government in widening the volunteer base to make it an attractive activity for those people who are not traditionally involved. Most notable in this context is the report by the Russell Commission (2005), presenting "a national framework for youth action and engagement... to deliver a step change in the diversity, quality, and quantity of young people's volunteering". The Commission's vision is of "a society in which young people feel connected to their communities [and] seek to exercise influence over what is done and the way it is done". Similar to the expectations associated with lifelong learning, the

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<sup>9</sup> However, Hall (1999) disputes that Britain experiences a similar erosion of social capital as suggested in the United States and that associational structures have remained largely intact.

expected potential of volunteering is regarded as the investment in a social infra-structure with a particular set of outcomes and focuses primarily on skill development and counteracting the perceived fragmentation of local communities. However, this focus and particular emphasis on “how to invigorate social capital” (Putnam 2000) supports Nan Lin (2001, 2002) who regards social capital as part of the neo-capital theories in that it is primarily concerned with “the investment in social relations with expected returns”.

It is in this context that a different version of ‘social capital’, and its associated concept of ‘social space’, as suggested by Pierre Bourdieu, becomes relevant for this study. Although Bourdieu also essentially regards social capital as the networks that individuals can draw on as a personal resource, he however places social capital within the context of other forms of resources (such as economic, cultural, symbolic capital) that interact with each other and position a person in “social space” (Bourdieu 1984). As these forms of capital are not evenly distributed within society, an exploration of social capital suggests a structural perspective on the availability of resources. Social capital therefore transcends the importance it can have for individuals as it refers to the distribution and maintenance of privilege within society and thus the collective experience of power and (dis)advantage of particular groups. Similarly, Alex-Assensoh (2002:215) points out that research on the decline of social capital has primarily concentrated on individual inclination and suggests that social capital and engagement is also affected by the composition of the neighbourhoods where people live. Poverty, for example, inhibits civic engagement such as voting behaviour and engagement in national political affairs, but often generates many instances of people attempting to re-dress inequalities locally.

As a result, less powerful groups may well have a rich range of social networks, but their relative positioning and status is unlikely to yield access to the “friends in high places”, or display features of “linking” social capital that Bourdieu regards as a cornerstone for the acquisition and maintenance of privilege and influence. Bourdieu’s perspective on social capital therefore offers a framework for investigating the collective experiences of groups within society and to re-locate an exploration of social capital concepts within the area of social justice and empowerment.

### ***Summary of the literature review***

The review of the literature seems to be supporting Marjorie Mayo (1997) who argues that there is a renewed need to examine education for transformation and to place it within a contemporary context. The agenda for social change that seeks to address issues of poverty, exclusion, equality and social justice is therefore located at a different end of a theoretical spectrum that is primarily concerned with individual advancement and progress. This however suggests a greater emphasis on the processes rather than the (predetermined) outcomes of education and learning and brings the writings of informal educators into a more central position.

Finger and Asun describe how the discourse on emancipation has been replaced by one that focuses primarily on self actualisation and the demands of the market. They see a range of possible scenarios for adult education arising from the current societal trend:

1. The *business school* scenario where the privatisation and instrumentalisation of adult education will lead to particular aspects of adult education being subsumed into corporate development and growth agendas and thus losing its own, distinct identity.
2. The *risk group* scenario where adult education's function is restricted to increasing the skills of those groups who are most likely to be non-participants and thus most at risk not be equipped for the demands of what Finger and Asun call turbo-capitalism.
3. The leisure scenario which will reduce adult education to the leisure interests of an increasingly privileged section of the population. (Finger and Asun 2001:134-136).

Finger and Asun however also envisage a 4<sup>th</sup> scenario in which adult education is required to re-define its position with regard to social change within the context of current societal challenges. In their view this 'social responsibility scenario' will encompass participatory democracy, community building and empowerment. Crucial in this process 'of learning our way out' is linking awareness with institutional change<sup>10</sup>, i.e. individual and collective learning which needs to be related to institutional and organisational change.

### ***The Research Questions***

As outlined above, the main discourse and academic debate falls into the following main categories:

1. Dealing with increasing access to learning and blueprints for implementing a 'learning society'.

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<sup>10</sup>in line with Illich's view of the role of institutions

2. Attempting to widen the curriculum from its narrow focus on employability and skills.
3. Taking a critical stance with regard to the idea of a learning society, especially with reference to the lack of democracy and the implicit mechanisms for social control.
4. Trying to revive a radical agenda on adult education, primarily focusing on collective concerns, reclaiming social purpose and through identifying the current challenges for a radical agenda, primarily arising from growing individualisation and a 'post modern' pluralistic approach that mitigates against mobilising collective concerns.
5. Promoting, citizenship and social capital and volunteering.

Each of the above sections has made a contribution to better understanding the parameters of the proposed study but each one of them has left particular gaps that the study is seeking to address:

The predominant academic discourse seems to be primarily reactive to the dominant discourse that is generally shaped by the contexts outlined in chapter 1. As such it pursues a largely individual agenda which is outcome focused. Equally, those who are interested in inequality have approached the issues from a utilitarian angle and inequalities as borne out by (non) participation patterns do not offer much of a collective perspective and also concentrate on individual advancement. Furthermore, issues of exclusion and marginalisation have also become individualised and pathologised in the process with an emphasis on the deficiencies of people rather than the strengths that they might bring to organising their own affairs. Useful insights are gained into the mindset

and motivational dispositions of disenfranchised and marginalised people, some of these findings are transferable to this study – as will be shown later, but offer little in terms of understanding the processes involved in mobilising people collectively.

The literature therefore provides a theoretical base, makes a link to current policy agendas, connects informal education, community development and the renewal of neighbourhoods and illustrates how informal education can make a contribution. The literature makes a good case for the need to pursue a collective agenda within adult learning that counteracts the dominant individualistic, employability and skills-based focus of adult learning and provides a range of case studies and examples for what might be achieved, thus further supporting the rationale for this study.

The writing relating to pursuing a collective and transformative agenda however appears to be predominantly normative in character, in that it describes what there might be under different circumstances, leaving a considerable empirical gap. This echoes one of the main criticisms of critical pedagogy, in that the link between awareness raising and praxis is tenuous as “awareness-raising, no matter how sophisticated its pedagogy, will only be as good as the perspective [of social change] to which it is connected” (Finger and Asun 2001:166).

The newly revived interest in volunteering has attracted a range of policy documents and practical guidance on managing, diversifying and maximising volunteer effort, but has so far generated little academic debate. On the other hand, writing in the associated fields of



‘citizenship’ and ‘social capital’ is extensively theorised but draws very little on supportive empirical studies. Literature on citizenship explores community engagement within the wider context of the attitudes and behaviours relating to civil society, and large scale empirical studies such as Pattie et al (2002, 2004) make a valuable contribution to understanding civic attitudes, but do not offer an insight into the lived experience and motivation of those people within local communities who clearly do not seem to be affected by the ‘post-modern’ condition – i.e. those who are actively engaged in ‘making a difference’ in local neighbourhoods, contributing to renewal agendas in the widest possible sense and who are filling the concepts of ‘citizenship’ with their very own meaning.

What appears to be missing in the literature and the resulting discourse is an in-depth understanding of the lived experience of people who are currently actively involved in their locality. This research therefore is looking at activism from two main perspectives: firstly the contemporary ‘mindset’ of community activists and secondly the conditions that are currently in place to support activism. Specifically this study is seeking to address the following questions:

1. How do people who are actively engaged in community activism make sense of their own involvement?
  - How do they describe their motivation?
  - What are the current pathways into collective action?

- Which kinds of concepts are drawn on to explain the need for collective approaches?
  - What are the desired and perceived benefits?
2. How do people experience the context of their actual community involvement?
- Which resources are available to them and do they make use of?
  - What do they consider to be the conditions that foster and support collective community involvement?
  - What effect does their involvement have on them or their communities?

## **Chapter 2      Methodology**

### ***Introduction***

The nature of the research questions outlined in chapter 1 suggests a research approach that is essentially exploratory and qualitative in nature, as it attempts to map the conceptual tools that people use to explain their community involvement and to outline the parameters in which people feel active community participation can flourish. The study is based on a set of case studies with semi-structured interviews being used for the collection of the data and using grounded theory methodology.

The application of grounded theory method is generally divided into the two approaches advocated by Anselm Strauss (Strauss & Corbin 1990) and Barney Glaser (1992) and there is considerable disagreement on the need to be “pure” in the application of grounded theory methodology and the danger of “muddling methods” (Stern 1994). However, for the purpose of this thesis it does not seem appropriate to contribute to this debate; the methodology has largely been guided by Strauss and Corbin’s thoughts on the need for truthfulness, usefulness and logic rather than purity of methods (1994, 1998) and the requirement to be open and transparent about the approach that has been taken (Huberman & Miles 1994, Stern 1994).

This chapter therefore covers general reflections on qualitative research, with particular reference to issues of credibility and reliability arising from this approach. Furthermore this chapter will seek to address issues arising from the method of collecting data, such as

the strategies for sampling and selecting case studies as well as some of the ethical considerations arising from negotiating access and consent. Finally this chapter will outline the methods that were used to analyse the data, including thoughts on some of the limitations and concerns that arise from narrative enquiry.<sup>11</sup>

### ***Trustworthiness of Qualitative Research***

Qualitative research has a long tradition, has undergone a number of shifts and developments, but remains difficult to define clearly as “it has no theory or paradigm that it is distinctly its own ....or a distinct set of methods that are entirely its own” (Denzin and Lincoln 1994:3). However, part of the initial, generic definition offered by Denzin and Lincoln that qualitative researchers “attempt to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to them...” (1994:2) seems to capture the aim of this particular research.

Small scale, qualitative studies, exploring the social world and the lived experience of participants, do not generally correspond to traditional positivist criteria that are designed to establish credibility of data. Instead credibility, reliability and validity is often achieved through what Lincoln and Guba (1985) refer to as ‘trustworthiness’, i.e. by demonstrating thoroughness and rigour and by seeking methods of confirmation (Bassey 1999, Cresswell 1998, Lincoln and Guba 1985). It is suggested that a number of strategies can be employed to achieve this ‘trustworthiness’, such as addressing:

- Representativeness of research

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<sup>11</sup> A difference is made here between narrative enquiry as a method and a phenomenon.

- Engagement
- Peer review
- Saturation
- Triangulation

(O'Leary 2004)

These strategies have been employed throughout and, as will be shown below, have shaped the design of the study as well as the analysis of the data.

## ***Case Studies***

The nature of the research question(s) suggested the use of what Stake refers to as a “collective case study” (1994:237), that is the instrumental study of a number of cases jointly, that have the potential of theorising about a potentially even larger set of cases. The use of case studies as a strategy for data collection is open to similar potential criticism and limitation as qualitative research itself. One of the issues arising from case study research, and much of qualitative research, is how much the resulting findings can be generalised. Theorists differ considerably in their views about whether and to what extent this can be achieved (Schofield 1993, Stake 1994, 2000, Gomm, Hammersley and Foster 2000). Williams (2002) suggests that the denial of generalisations in qualitative research is based on too narrow a definition of the term and that there are different meanings that can be attached. He argues that rather than attempting to achieve “total” generalisation or “statistical” generalisation, qualitative research is designed to achieve “moderatum” generalisations, where aspects of a situation “can be seen to be instances of

a broader set of recognisable features” (Williams 2002:131). Similarly, with case studies, there is some agreement that although case study research is not designed to achieve scientific generalisations, there can be nevertheless forms of “naturalistic generalisations” (Stake 2000) or “working hypotheses” (Lincoln and Guba 2000), the value of which lie in the transferability to other cases of a similar kind (Leininger 1994).

As will be shown below (see section on sampling), care has been taken in the selection of participants that the sample covers both a distribution expected in any population<sup>12</sup> as well as being representative of the geographical area this study covers.

### ***Selection of case studies***

The parameters for choosing individual (instrumental) case studies were set by the working definition that research participants should be involved in ‘collective community activity in any (unpaid) capacity’. The potential sample therefore consisted of all the people to whom this definition would apply.

However, choosing all participants from the same geographical area, and who are all broadly associated with the same kind of supportive infrastructure, also allowed for the set of individual case studies to be regarded as one simultaneous intrinsic case study (Stake 1994). The decision to invite participants exclusively from the Gateshead Borough was made for the following three reasons:

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<sup>12</sup> Such as gender and age

## **1. Opportunity and curiosity to explore the background to a ‘phenomenon’**

The review of the literature indicated that the conditions for adult learning that have the capacity to effect social change have largely been eroded and that what is commonly referred to as the ‘post-modern’ condition militates against the kind of shared value base that is required to mobilise people to engage in collective action.

And yet, when Gateshead Council’s Adult Learning Service was inspected by the then newly formed Adult Learning Inspectorate (ALI) in March 2003, they were awarded a ‘Grade 1’ for its community learning provision – a hitherto unprecedented achievement for any other Local Authority. According to ALI, Gateshead’s approach to community capacity building and community learning was considered to be “outstanding” and a “model for good practice”. Many of the statements made by ALI seemed to suggest an environment and outcomes that appeared to be unlikely in the current climate surrounding adult learning, such as local people having “made significant improvement to their environment”, people playing an active role in decision making, skills of community leadership and self advocacy, and how community capacity building “has made a significant impact on the quality of life in local communities”. Given the focus of this thesis it was of interest to further investigate ALI’s findings and observations and attempt to gain an insight into the profiles, reflections and commonalities of people who appeared to display features of a collective and community minded approach that on the one hand is regarded to be on the decline, but on the other hand is very much in demand.

## **2. Opportunity to put study into a wider context**

After having received this external validation, Gateshead Council, with support from the Learning and Skills Council, commissioned the University of Sunderland to further explore the indicators for good practice highlighted by ALI.<sup>13</sup> The resulting report focused on the declared strengths of the Adult Learning Service, especially relating to the infrastructure that the Council had put in place:

- Support for management committees
- The development of volunteers
- Opportunities for developing community leadership skills
- The skill base of professional staff.

Data collection for the resulting report concentrated on interviews with fieldwork staff, middle managers & project management committees, and examined existing management information and learner histories. The latter in particular indicated many of the very complex relationships and conditions that underlie community learning and the benefits of an infrastructure that allowed for a wide range of potential progression routes that exceeded the narrow framework set by central government funding criteria. As a result, many of the contributing factors to Gateshead's success are known, documented<sup>14</sup>, understood and indeed shared by the findings of others elsewhere and thus contribute to the process of triangulation with the data that is gathered in this research.

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<sup>13</sup> Identifying Best Practice in Community Learning 2004

<sup>14</sup> See appendix IV for summary of main findings



I was particularly struck by ALI's observation that "local people demonstrate a high level of mutual support and a commitment to their community" and a "desire to reinvest in a community that has supported them". It became clear that staff, often supported by their own theoretical understanding of informal education and community development principles, had actively sought to promote an environment that would foster such a commitment to local communities. However, what I feel is missing is the perspective of participants that explores their underlying value base, what motivates them, how they actually make sense of and explain their own community involvement and also what they consider to be significant factors in support of their development.

### **3. Opportunity to build on an existing understanding of the culture and context**

The previous involvement of the researcher in the geographical area and the prior knowledge brought both advantages and disadvantages. On the one hand writers on biographical research and the use of narratives highlight the need to engage with the subject matter and the respondents in a way that increases the likelihood of capturing the essence of the data that is being collected. My previous role and reputation as community/youth worker in the area (as opposed to being an academic outsider) was particularly helpful when I was talking to people outside my age/cultural/ethnic framework and eased my relationship for example with my young interviewees or participants from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups. Similarly, as my language does not display the conventional linguistic markers that are associated with

social class and locality<sup>15</sup>, references to shared understandings and experiences assisted with increasing trust, and my gender and my age often made for easy relationships with older women and often more formal arrangements with older men.

However, writers (Goodson and Sikes 2001, Morse 1994, Miller and Bell 2002) draw attention to the inherent dangers and shortcomings arising from too close an involvement, for example the potential for bias and the ethical issues that arise from negotiating access and consent, such as a confusion of roles. On balance, after careful consideration, it was decided that, as outlined below, the advantages would outweigh the disadvantages if due regard was given to managing the potential issues.

## ***Sampling Strategy***

Having narrowed down the potential participants to a particular geographical area, a number of different sampling strategies could be employed for the selection of actual cases to be explored. Community organisations in Gateshead were contacted and given an outline of what the research was about (appendix I) and asked if I could speak to people ‘who [in an unpaid capacity were] working with others to make a difference in their local community’. Initially approaches were made by local community workers who then provided details of people who had agreed to take part or could be contacted by me. Later on I also received contacts from interviewees who indicated that there were other people that they thought I should talk to and they offered to make contact with them for me. The choices of participants were therefore primarily made by ‘intermediaries’, which also

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<sup>15</sup> I am not a native speaker of English

overlaid the research with their interpretation of what constitutes collective action. Initially I saw this as problematic, as this brought me into contact with people, for example those who were involved in volunteering, who had not initially been envisaged being part of the sample. At the data evaluation stage however it became clear that this unintended diversity of the sample brought valuable dimensions to the research that assisted with understanding some of the complexities that arise from people's pathways and journeys through community activism. The range of community based projects that were initially contacted covered agencies located in the rural and urban parts of Gateshead, within affluent and deprived neighbourhoods, who worked with young people and older residents. There was therefore a good likelihood that potential participants would come from a wide range of age groups and backgrounds and thus reflect the diversity of the population as a whole. Half of the interviews were conducted with people as they were introduced, for the second half some selection took place with a view to increasing the diversity of the sample.

The sampling strategy raises issues of generalisability from interpretive research which are a matter of debate for a number of theorists. Although statistically representative samples can not be aimed for in this study, "ad hoc" samples as Mason points out are never truly ad hoc and limit the analytical potential of the study (1996:92) whereas convenience sampling might result in a selection of cases that are atypical (Schofield 2000). For this study therefore it seemed most helpful to follow Gomm, Hammersley and Foster's suggestion to study a small number of cases that have been selected to cover the "extremes of expected relevant heterogeneity within the population" (2000:107) or what

Mason (1996) describes as a sample based on “a relevant range of units, related to a wider universe, but not representing it directly” (Mason 1996 in May 2002:132).

In the first instance this relevant heterogeneity was defined through the categories of gender and age. The latter seemed particularly important, as one of the assumptions underlying this study is that people’s attitudes that might foster or hinder a willingness to participate in collective community activity have been affected by the conditions of late / post modernity. It could therefore be possible that younger participants might bring a different perspective from older ones. As a result, a particularly wide range of ages, with a strong representation at the extreme end of the spectrum was aimed for and achieved <sup>16</sup>

In terms of gender, an equal distribution was originally aimed for, but not achieved. As explained below, participation in the study was facilitated by introductions and although all men who were put forward were interviewed they only constituted just over a third of the overall sample. However, as annual monitoring statistics of Gateshead Council indicate, this gender distribution can also be found in the population of those involved in their local communities on a voluntary basis.

At the next level the categories were determined by the demographic composition of Gateshead, leading to ensuring representation from people with disabilities, people out of

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<sup>16</sup> The youngest respondent was 16 and the oldest 84.

work and people with few or no qualifications<sup>17</sup>. And finally, people from Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) groups were represented in proportion to the overall population.<sup>18</sup> As has been shown in the review of the literature, studies on civic engagement and social capital suggest a link to associational infrastructures and as such the geographical particularities of Gateshead Borough seemed significant, as it covers both urban and rural areas. It can be assumed that the opportunities and lived realities for engagement might be affected by where people live, so care was taken to ensure representation from all areas of the Gateshead Borough, including both urban and rural environments<sup>19</sup>.

Age		Employment status		Gender	
				Female	13
Under 20	3	Retired	6	Male	7
20-29	3	Student	1	Ethnic Background	
30-49	4	Employed	4	White /British	17
50-59	4	Self employed	1	Irish	1
60-69	4	Not employed	7	Black/Sikh/ Muslim	2
70-89	2	Sickness benefit	1	Location	
				Urban	16
				Rural	4

**Figure 1 Overview of sample**

All potential interviewees were given written information about the purpose and parameters of the research in advance (see appendix I) and all actual interviewees were

<sup>17</sup> Gateshead has an above average proportion of residents who are long term unemployed, receive long term sickness benefit and have no or few qualifications.  
<sup>18</sup> Gateshead’s most significant minority ethnic group are the orthodox Jewish community. Although initially an approach was made it did not lead to an interview. Numerically the next most prominent BME groups are represented in the sample.  
<sup>19</sup> At the extreme rural end of the borough is Chopwell – an ex mining community – a distance of 13 miles from the centre of Gateshead

also given a verbal account of the main aspects of the study and were asked to sign a consent form (appendix II).

### ***Negotiating Access and Consent***

Miller and Bell (2002) draw attention to the ethical issues that may arise from negotiating access and ensuring informed consent as well as the range of power issues that are inherent in establishing a research relationship. The latter in particular blurred the boundaries between negotiating access and consent in a number of ways.

Morse (1994) warns against not entering research settings as ‘stranger’ and suggests that previous work roles may affect the researcher’s sensitivity and create issues of validity arising from bias. In this case I was conscious of the possibility that my previous knowledge of Gateshead’s working practices and potential loyalty to my ex colleagues might affect how I interpret people’s experience. Notwithstanding this, I believe that the use of trusted intermediaries to make initial contact allowed me access to respondents who might have otherwise been hesitant to talk to me as an academic. A large number of the community projects that were contacted for the research are located in comparatively deprived neighbourhoods and I expected that issues of social class would play a role, as would ideas about the nature and value of research as well as people working in higher education. This was confirmed by several people, who said that they had been nervous about talking to me, but that they had been re-assured by the intermediary that I was ‘canny’, ‘one of them, really’, ‘a lovely lass’. At the end of the interviews several people said that they had not expected to enjoy the process as much as they did and that it had

been easier to talk to me than they had thought. The role of the intermediaries and my relationship with them as a fellow community worker therefore benefited the research in a number of ways; the intermediaries felt more comfortable approaching potential research participants as they felt confident to re-assure them of my approach, and hence a greater likelihood of encouraging people who might feel less confident, and a certain degree of solidarity with me as a colleague coupled with their own interest in the research itself.

However, the role of gate-keepers, especially in relation to accessing less powerful groups brings with it a range of ethical dilemmas (Miller and Bell 2002). On the one hand, as illustrated above, this allowed me access to a range of participants from potentially less powerful groups, whose contributions might not have been included otherwise. It also helped with those participants who might have been intimidated by the more formal approach to obtaining consent<sup>20</sup>, for example because of anxieties about literacy levels. On the other hand it raised issues of consent in terms of how much participants might have felt (albeit unintentionally) coerced by their relationship with the respective community worker<sup>21</sup>. But then, some people were approached by their local worker and declined to take part – the use of an intermediary might have been helpful here in decreasing the pressure people might have felt otherwise.

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<sup>20</sup> It was interesting to note that none of the respondents showed much interest in the consent form (despite my meticulously going through them).

<sup>21</sup> This was quite likely to be the case for one participant who was suggested by a course tutor and who then twice cancelled/ chose not to turn up for the interview.

Doucet and Mauthner (2002) argue that although ethical issues generally relate to the relationship between researchers and respondents, there are other research relationships that should be included in ethical discussions. In addition to the 'other' relationships suggested by Doucet and Mauthner, such as readers and users of research, knowledge and academic communities (2002:125), it seems appropriate for this research to particularly draw attention to the triangular relationship between the 'gatekeepers', the researcher and the research respondents and how these relationships might affect the resulting data:

#### Gatekeeper/ participant:

The question here arises on what basis the intermediaries have chosen the potential respondents. The fact that participants were going to be invited to reflect on the supportive infrastructure and therefore also on the quality of the community worker's intervention might have encouraged workers to favour respondents with whom they had a good relationship and who were likely to give a positive account. In terms of consent it appeared that this was given to the community worker rather than the researcher.

#### Gatekeeper/ researcher

All the gatekeepers were known to the researcher. This is likely to have had an impact in a number of directions. As mentioned above, this without a doubt increased the range of potential respondents I could interview. On the other hand there are issues of 'representation' and the power that is exercised in who eventually will become a participant (Miller and Bell 2002). The wish to offer me contacts who were expected to provide me with 'good' data in some cases clearly



favoured the most outspoken, confident participants. At the other end of the spectrum the invitation to take part in the research could be seen foremost as a continuation of the general developmental work that the community worker was undertaking with a participant. Here the emphasis was less on the expected 'usefulness' of the data but more on the expectation that the process of being interviewed might be useful as an experience for respondents because it would build confidence and practice communication and reflective skills. On these occasions I was clearly regarded as a fellow community worker / youth worker who could be relied upon to assist with this process.<sup>22</sup>

#### Participant / Researcher

From the above it is clear that the relationship between the researcher and the participants was largely mediated and refracted through the respondent /intermediary relationships. Because of these existing relationships I was very conscious of some potential dilemmas which might arise and I was particularly meticulous emphasising both the voluntary nature of their involvement and the strict confidentiality. However, it is possible that some people might have remembered me working in Gateshead and would have been aware of my involvement in setting up particular projects and my relationship to particular workers. When given a choice I selected the people who knew me least. On the other hand it seemed that some people felt more comfortable knowing that I knew

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<sup>22</sup> This was very likely the case with one participant where the fact that she had the confidence to actually agree to talk to me will have been seen as the most desirable outcome for the intermediary, whereas her contribution to the data was negligible and was not suitable to be included in the subsequent evaluation.

what they were referring to as it often removed the stress of having to reveal their limited knowledge of, for example, what certain projects do, what exact job titles are, which funding sources they were using.

## ***Rapport***

Out of these relationships arise the issues of ‘rapport’, i.e. as Patton (1990:317) puts it, the ‘stance vis-à-vis the person being interviewed’, whilst maintaining neutrality vis-à-vis the content of what is being said. Duncombe and Jessop (2002) focus on the complex interplay of methodological, feminist, and ethical considerations that relate to building and maintaining rapport in qualitative research. They in particular draw attention to the potential for the instrumentalised commoditisation of a particular set of skills that are geared towards ‘extracting’ more in-depth information out of participants. The resulting ethical concerns here would be how the researcher can influence the agenda and how much informed consent can realistically be given under these circumstances. The issues arising from rapport in this study need to be discussed under a number of ways:

The pre-existing gate-keeper / researcher relationship seemed to provide a transferred level of rapport with participants, as there seemed to be an assumption of trustworthiness. People who did not know me were more guarded or nervous initially if I had made direct contact with them and when we met without being physically introduced by the intermediary.

A further level of rapport arose in interviews with women. Janet Finch (1993) talks about her experience of interviewing women and that the woman to woman interview situation as a “special situation” shows particular characteristics. Women often respond very positively to being interviewed by a woman for three reasons:

1. women are often more used to being interviewed about private aspects of their lives (health visitors, motherhood) and are often the preferred target for questioning on private and home affairs and often therefore find questions about themselves more acceptable than men
2. an informal setting for the interview (especially in the home) can mirror the friendly conversation that women often have with other women
3. the structural position of women often puts women in a more isolated position and many women therefore welcome the opportunity to talk to a sympathetic interviewer allowing them to think through issues in more depth. (Finch 1993: 168-170).

Like Janet Finch, I feel that many things that I found about women’s lives, I found out not because of my particular expertise as an interviewer, but because of the fact that I was also a woman. There were a number of verbal clues that women identified with me<sup>23</sup> and this was particularly pronounced for those women who talked about wanting more out of life than their ascribed roles. They indicated that they expected me to understand this (elaboration on point 3 above) since by the very nature that I had a career and was

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<sup>23</sup> For example women made references to aspects of my family life, motherhood and the resulting domestic responsibilities, or they expected me to understand their lack of confidence in certain circumstances.

pursuing a doctorate I was therefore living 'it'. The woman to woman issue was compounded in those cases where the intermediaries were women too. In these cases it seemed that solidarity was expressed with me as another working class woman community worker (see also section on gate-keeping).

Finch (1993) agrees with Oakley (1981) that as a feminist there is a moral obligation to reciprocate the trust that is invested in the researcher by being prepared to also invest some of one's own identity. As a result I think the boundaries between what Patton (1990:317) calls "rapport" and "neutrality" become potentially less distinct. Patton sees rapport as being related to the person being interviewed and neutrality as referring to the content of what is being said. Despite being mindful of the need to maintain neutrality there might well have been occasions where, with respondents of both genders, rapport was being established by reacting to the content of the interviews, such as acknowledging people's achievements or empathising with some of their experiences. Mies (1993:68) describes this form of involvement as "conscious partiality" which she regards as being in direct opposition to the impartial, "spectator-knowledge" that is acquired by a disinterested and distant relationship to the research "subject". For Mies this conscious partiality puts both the participant and the researcher into a larger social context. However, Mies also points out that the role of woman and scholar is also an inherently contradictory one – one shares the experienced oppression of women, the other the privilege of the (male) academic elite (1993:67). This particular power relationship became apparent in many of the participants' reaction to the interview process. Some people were quite nervous, repeatedly asking me whether they were saying the 'right thing', getting flustered, and wondering whether they sounded silly (they were all

women). In some cases the response was reminiscent of people entering an examination situation. Maybe this was compounded by the fact that people knew I was a teacher/lecturer and switching the tape on was then similar to the official start of the 'test'. Despite repeated affirmations that I was particularly interested in a broad range of responses and that therefore there were no right or wrong answers, I was frequently asked whether people were saying what I was 'hoping for'.

However, the question still remains how one is to treat the particularly in-depth knowledge that was gained from the woman to woman interview. For me this was compounded by the fact that some of the personal revelations came after the 'official' end of the interview – are they still part of the initially agreed contract? Moreover, I was struck by how much trust was invested in me anyway, as none of the respondents was very keen to explore in any depth the affirmation of confidentiality that I insisted on explaining.

Not all interviews displayed the above features. Issues of identification and solidarity were not generally present with the very young women and establishing rapport with them followed a similar pattern as conversations with men. Here I could observe different aspects of 'placing', i.e. attempts to identify other opportunities for generating a conversation about a shared experience. Some of this was achieved through my past experience of working in Gateshead, with references being made to past events or mutual acquaintances. In many cases this happened easily and was often also facilitated by the 'intermediary' who presented the commonalities between me and the interview participants in the introduction. On other occasions, especially with one of the older male

respondents, I had to work hard for a relationship as my trustworthiness seemed to be assessed by the depth of my local knowledge before the interview could start.

## ***Interviews***

The exploratory nature of the research questions suggested gathering data through one-to-one interviews that followed a semi-structured format. Three people were interviewed to test the interview schedule, in particular with regard to the clarity of the wording of prompts and questions. Patton (1990) raised some very valid issues in this context which led to my reducing the number of dichotomous questions and exploring the value of presupposition questions. The former were likely to artificially curtail the richness of a potential response, whereas the latter was appealing, not only because of the likely impact on the data, but also because it conveyed the message to interviewees that the ‘presupposition’ was that they had important insights to contribute.

To ensure relative comparability of the data all participants were guided to reflect on the following key themes:

- Current involvements and pathways
- Reflections on views and opinions on motivation for involvement
- Perceived impact and value of involvement
- Sources of support.

The sequence of actual questions however followed the natural pattern of the conversation and therefore has varied with different respondents. Some interviewees covered the themes without very much prompting and others were guided more regularly.

Once potential participants were identified through the methods outlined above, 20 interviews were conducted between March 2005 and January 2006. All participants were given written information in advance (appendix I) which in almost all cases was also reinforced verbally by the intermediaries. Interviews lasted one hour on average and were conducted at a venue of the participant's choice. Interviews were tape-recorded, and in some instances additional notes were also taken. The recordings of interviews were transcribed verbatim.

## ***Narratives***

Before outlining the methods that were used to evaluate the data, I want to draw attention to the particular issues that can arise from interviews based on people's interpretation of a particular set of life experiences. It is important to look at the issues and the potential dilemmas that can arise from biographical research and the data need to be considered in the general context of how people tell stories about their lives and how they make sense of their lives in the telling. Scott (1998) reminds us that a 'life' is always the past as it is reconstructed by the participant in the present and more importantly [I would say] with the knowledge and understanding of the present. So in some ways the process of 'story telling' appeared to be happening on two separate levels for some people, as they were trying to follow a chronological pattern, attempting to recall what they saw as 'facts', whilst also outlining how their opinions and views had changed over time. The fact that people operated on these different levels was initially not problematic as the focus was

less on what actually happened in people's lives, but more on how people made sense of their lives and the conceptual tools they were using to explain their particular position. Within an interpretive research paradigm, concepts of reality vary and people's perceptions and chosen explanations may be similar but not the same and the resulting generalisations may well be 'fuzzy',<sup>24</sup> (Bassey 1999).

Bruner (2004) suggests that there are structural similarities between the 'self' and the chosen narrative, e.g. those with a clearer sense of self also tell stories with a more distinct purpose, i.e. they portray their lives in a more orderly and purposeful manner. This also means that they might be more selective in the telling and more mindful of the impression they make on the listener. For Bruner this reflects the private and the public, as no narrative can exist very well without consideration of what the listener or recipient will think. Bruner's views were confirmed by the way people were telling their stories during the interviews. Some respondents, especially those who chose to explain their involvement through outlining their theoretical understanding of the need for community activism, presented an altogether more coherent, and apparently logical story; i.e. they talked more about cause and effect, outlined how the benefits of their involvement matched their expectations and attempted to reflect some of the complexities and contradictions that were inherent in their activism. The more outwardly coherent accounts of these respondents' stories often reflected a more confident portrayal of themselves as people. In some cases this was seen to be a by-product of their activities, as people talked about how they had become more confident about the validity of their

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<sup>24</sup> Bassey borrows the term 'fuzzy' from Bart Kosko who claims that the "fuzzy principle states that everything is a matter of degree" (1994:18) Fuzzy Thinking Harper /Collins



experiences and views. They reflected on how they had learned to trust their own opinions and how they felt that their views counted, for example that professionals now listened to them. For these people being part of this research was then seen in a similar light – they were confident that they had something worthwhile to contribute.

In contrast, other narratives had a distinct feel of surprise and wonder and chronological patterns and causal effects were less emphasized by respondents but seemed to arise from the structure of the interviews. The way the interviews were (semi) structured followed a conversational pattern that could represent what Pierre Bourdieu (1990) refers to as a ‘biographical illusion’, that is the rhetorical convention (illusion) that treats a life as a coherent story based on a chronological sequence of meaningful events. During the interviews people told their story from a wide variety of starting points and chose to emphasise very different aspects. However, it may well be that the structure of the interview encouraged a sequence and a relationship of causality or chronology between questions that might not have been chosen by all participants themselves as “in accounting for a life....the little snippets of narrative told in an interview are sewn together to generate a different kind of unity from any that may be perceived by the teller” (Schostak 2006:141).

Furthermore, as feminist writers in particular point out, there remains the potential that research participants “narrate themselves through the dominant discourses of subjectivity, ultimately reinforcing the implicit rules of subjectivity by which ....individuals are expected to govern and regulate [themselves]” (Aldred and Gillies 2002:46). This then

also relates to the fact that this reconstructed narrative is further refracted through the research process itself – i.e. it is embedded in the traditions of what the social norms allow participants to say, and also through the shape that the researcher imposes on the narrative through the research design. The latter in particular is then also affected by the biography of the researcher. These issues became very apparent with some of the interviewees, especially older women, who started to talk again after the tape had been switched off or when the interview no longer seemed to follow a perceived pattern. They then spoke, often in very animated ways or conspiratorial tones, of their unhappiness about prescribed gender roles and how, throughout their lives, they had tried to rebel. Involvement in community based activities was then re-positioned in the light of their need to “show them in the end”. Much of this was introduced by women saying that they expected that I would understand what they meant, that they would have liked to have had the opportunities they thought I had. Some women also expressed their solidarity with me. They praised me for attempting a doctorate and said that they hoped that by taking part in the interviews they had helped me a little towards getting there. There were clearly issues about ‘public’ and ‘private’ narratives here and I was also conscious of how my background, values and beliefs could shape my relationship with interviewees and accordingly their responses to my questions.

This ‘situatedness’ of the researcher not only has an impact on establishing rapport and the choice of the research questions, but also on how the answers were ‘heard’ and the data was eventually evaluated. Research findings, far from being a representation of ‘facts’, are the result of a relational process that generates “situated knowledge”. Feminist

writers in particular question claims of 'objectivity' in research, as often presented in positivist research paradigms, and Harding (1991) therefore differentiates between "weak" and "strong" objectivity or "reflexivity". She suggests that "strong" objectivity / reflexivity is achieved by researchers laying open the way their background and value base has shaped the research process rather than creating an illusion of detachment. In this study, as outlined earlier, on the most obvious level, gender issues clearly influenced the relationships that I was able to establish with research respondents. However, there were a much wider range of 'insider' and 'outsider' positions, with their accompanying assumptions and power relationships, which had to be negotiated and considered at all stages of the research. On the one hand these relationships were mirroring the distribution of power within society in general and my position was therefore different in each interview. On the other hand all of these positions were refracted through the particular status that I am assigned as an academic and the knowledge people might have had of my previous work roles and status in the area. A further layer of "positionality" is generated by the experiences, values and beliefs that I bring to the research process, for example the ethical underpinnings of my role as a community and youth worker, my political position, my social class and my cultural /ethnic background. On the basis of these positions the relationships and the resulting data gained from each encounter had to be shifted and re-negotiated. The success of this process of negotiating the multiple realities that I was inhabiting as a researcher seemed to be in a direct relationship to the 'richness' of the data that became available for analysis and the relative authenticity of the 'voice' of the participants. For instance, in some cases my position of power as a white, middle-aged academic was effectively offset by the confidence of some of the young interviewees, by

the black participants' knowledge of my political position and shared involvement in anti-racist work or for some of the working class people through my identification with community and youth work rather than higher education. In evaluating the data therefore I felt I needed to be mindful where the opportunities for 're-positioning' were not so successful. This, for example, was clearly the case for one young woman<sup>25</sup> who appeared very guarded in her answers and where there was very little that I could do to appear as anybody other than another (at best a well meaning), middle-class, middle aged professional asking her in a one-to-one situation about the choices she was making in her life. As much as my relative 'outsider' status might have allowed some participants to be more open about their less frequently articulated feelings, in this particular case the power dynamics coupled with the situational context appeared to have had more of a constraining effect. Her contribution brought a much valued working class, young person's perspective to the research findings; however, the question remains whether her voice could have been more authentically represented through a different interviewer or an entirely different data collection method.

### ***Evaluating the data***

Morse (1994) suggests that the cognitive processes involved analysing data from a qualitative enquiry are essentially the same, whatever the chosen method, but are not often made explicit. Morse has described these processes under the four headings of comprehending, synthesising, theorising and contextualising (1994:25), denoting different phases in the general research process, which can however be differently

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<sup>25</sup> Who was a teenage parent and had not been attending school

weighted and sequenced and may well overlap. However the ‘synthesising’ and ‘theorising’ phases are most closely related to evaluating and interpreting the data and it is these aspects that will now be described in more detail.

The evaluation of the data was undertaken in a number of different stages. Huberman and Miles (1994) point out that the research design itself is analytical, as the choices that are made at this stage already involve some form of anticipatory data reduction. Thus excerpts from the transcripts of the interviews were initially divided into the broad, four common themes of the interviews (see above). This process of “sifting” (Morse 1994) is one the features of the synthesising stage where I was trying to separate what, at this stage, I considered to be the irrelevant material from those excerpts that referred directly to the interview themes.<sup>26</sup>

At the next stage the synthesised material was grouped into the two main strands of the research:

- How people explain their own active involvement within local communities.
- What people consider to be the conditions that foster active involvement within local communities.

Looking at the ‘decontextualised’ data a number of different patterns and commonalities emerged and the approach moved from a more “tight”, deductive approach to a more “loose”, inductively orientated approach (Huberman and Miles 1994). Under each of these two main heading a number of sub-categories emerged; these will provide the structure for presenting the findings in Chapters 3 and 4.

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<sup>26</sup> This material was revisited later, as sub-categories of the themes emerged.

As the objective was to gain an insight into the broadest possible range of perspectives, the headings were developed as the interviews progressed and saturation was deemed to be reached when no new headings were emerging from interviews.

The second phase of evaluating the data was concerned with 'recontextualising' the data. What I was aiming for here was to look for relationships between the disaggregated elements of the findings and 'return' these to the biographies of the respondents. Here another set of commonalities emerged, indicating in particular how the motivational discourses link with the situational and what effect these links appear to have on the kinds of community involvement that occurs as a result. These aspects will be covered in the section on 'Movements and Dynamics' in Chapter 5.

This stage of the data evaluation also presented the opportunity to check for internal consistency. Here the material that was previously considered 'irrelevant' was also looked at again to search for clues as to how this information supported the overall stories that were being told. In addition, I was checking whether the 'synthesised' sections of the stories were true to the overall story being told by each respondent. At this point thoughts on the 'situatedness' of the research, as outlined earlier, were also revisited. Transcripts were looked at again and recordings listened to in their entirety. Coupled with notes that were taken immediately after the interviews I was trying to identify how in and what way my interventions and people's reactions to the process may have shaped and influenced the way they were portraying themselves.

## **Verification**

In drawing conclusions from the data, a number of steps have been taken to further support the findings that were emerging from the analysis of the interviews. Some of the areas for potential bias and the effects of potential reflexivity arising from the interview process itself have been discussed earlier.

In terms of support for the reliability of the conclusions I wish to draw attention to the methods of triangulation that have been employed. In line with Huberman and Miles' suggestion that triangulation is "less a tactic than a mode of enquiry" (1994:438), efforts were being made to build triangulation into the data collection process itself. This has been helped by not seeing this study in isolation, but by looking at how it draws on and further extends an existing body of related knowledge and research, as outlined in the review of the literature, primarily relating to volunteering, engagement in learning, community development, participation in political processes. Furthermore, the design of the study has been informed by my own continued professional practice. This has given me a range of opportunities for validating both the design of the study and the evaluation of the data:

- The interest for the research itself arose from observing the actions of community activists, discussions with colleagues in the field and previous pieces of research that left a number of questions unanswered.

- Opportunities arise at regular intervals to discuss similar topics to those raised in the interviews with other, similar groups of people, which have particularly helped with validating the methods of coding the interview data and verifying some of the interim findings<sup>27</sup>.
- In addition, many of the interim findings were integrated into professional discussions with students and fieldwork colleagues both informally and formally. The latter approach in particular is related to what Huberman and Miles (1994: 438) refer to as “auditing”, i.e. a method of inviting peers to assess whether the research design stands up to informed scrutiny.

### ***Presentation of findings***

As stated in Chapter 1 the main, overarching themes of the enquiry were to gain an insight into people’s personal disposition and motivation for collective community action as well as exploring the conditions that foster their involvement. In order to conduct the interviews ‘to go with the flow’ and to allow for natural, non threatening starting points, issues were discussed in a variety of sequences, but all covering the main themes (see earlier). The data emerging from the interviews suggested a complex picture and a more interrelated pattern than I had envisaged. To capture this complexity the data is presented in three sections (Chapter 3, 4 and 5).

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<sup>27</sup> For example, I am involved in interviewing potential students for the BA in Community and Youth Studies prior to admission to the University in Sunderland. Candidates are routinely invited to reflect on their motivation for community engagement and how their views on these matters have developed.



Chapter 3 concentrates on the ‘beginnings’ and deals with people’s personal motivation, covering:

- the pathways that had led people to their activism
- the benefits that people derived from their involvement
- the concepts that were used to explain their involvement.

Chapter 4 attempts to capture the complexities that arose from the relationships between the themes. Firstly, it covers the resources, in the broadest sense, that people felt they had at their disposal and secondly it outlines the impact that people felt their involvement had had on themselves and their local communities.

Chapter 5 analyses different kinds of community involvement and will then show how different kinds of motivational disposition as well as support and resources interact with the nature of the resulting community activity. And finally, this chapter will explore the dynamics of community involvement and focus on the way people’s involvement changed and developed as a result of their activity.

## **Chapter 3      Motivation**

### ***Introduction***

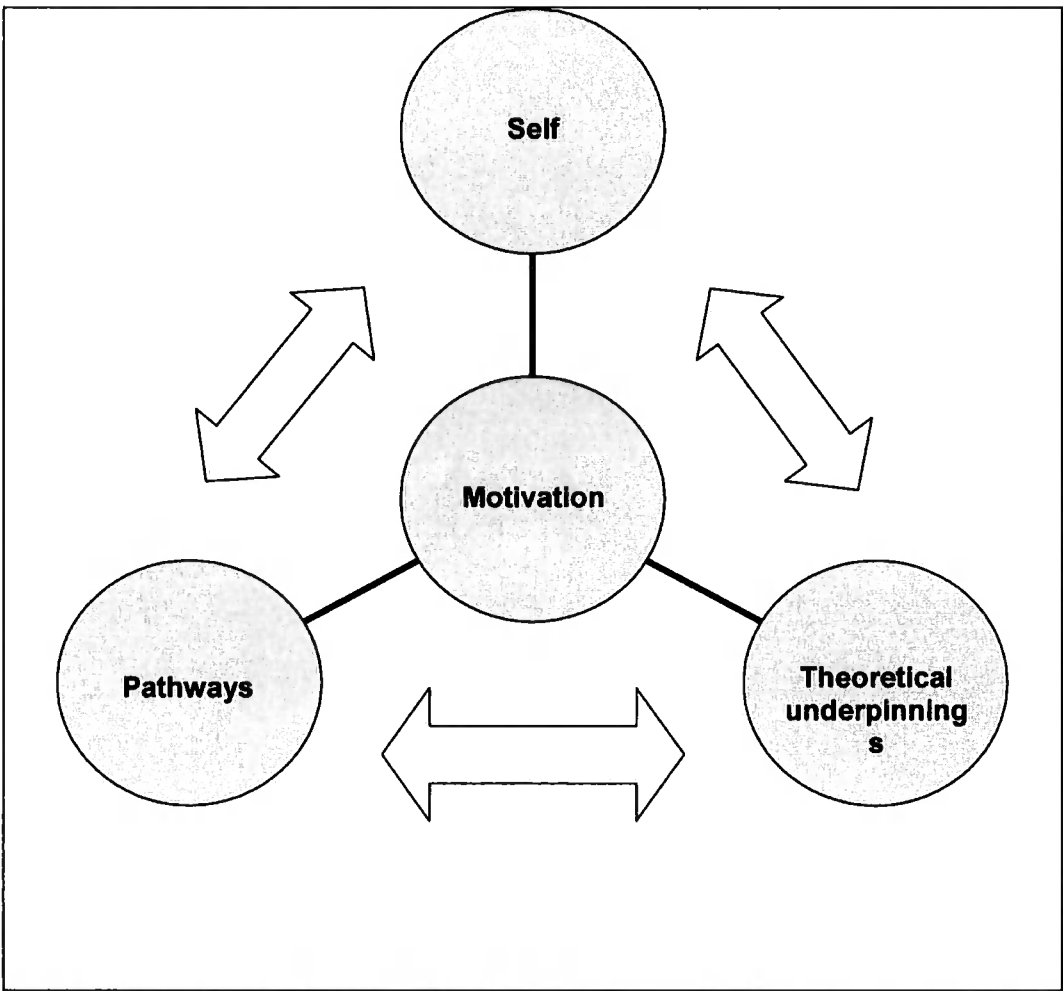
An analysis of people's motivation to engage in community action can be approached from a variety of, mainly psychological, perspectives, such as developmental psychology, theories of personality and motivation and is closely related to studies on volunteering (Penner and Finkelstein 1998) or to an exploration of people's motivation to engage in learning (McGivney 1990.). However, literature on motivation and education generally tends to focus on schooling and the corresponding issues of performance and relationships between teachers and pupils. Many of these studies reflect the predominance of a psychological, rather than a sociological approach to motivation and therefore tend to typify people into motivational orientations, assuming a hierarchical order of needs (Maslow 1968) or indicating a particular pattern within life cycles that favour differing psychological needs. However, a purely psychological approach to motivation that underplays the relevance of historical, social and political perspectives will not provide sufficient insight for this study. This is particularly the case because, as West (1996) points out, current psychological models in this context also tend to reflect a particular value base and perspectives of a particular, dominant culture and discourse. Thus theories based on hierarchical models for instance tend to rate 'autonomy' above 'communality' and place 'separation' above 'connectedness' and therefore work on assumptions that appear to be in direct conflict with the rationale for this study. Motivational theories tend to separate motives into categories that do not adequately

capture the complexity of people's needs and aspirations nor do they allow for a non-hierarchical co-existence of influencing factors (West 1996).

The conversations on people's motivation supported Beierlein and Preiser's (2005) suggestion that there is no particular 'typology' of community activist or volunteer, but that the motivation to take part is a complex interaction of a variety of forces as well as objective and subjective conditions. It is precisely this interaction that will be explored in this study. It is here where the diversity of the research respondents was of particular benefit as one of the objectives was to scope the range of views and concepts people draw on to explain their own involvement and the potential benefits arising from it. However, for this theme in the data analysis there is a particular issue with the potential of 'response bias', i.e. the tendency for respondents to offer answers that are regarded as socially desirable. Although the most prominent feature in people's responses was the significant benefit that people saw for themselves since, as one respondent put it succinctly "...I don't think anybody would do anything for a long time if they didn't like doing it and they didn't have to", there were recurrent references to a 'wish to help others'. On the one hand this might well have been an indicator for a general, paternalistic, benevolent current that could underlie people's community involvement; on the other hand it can be seen as an attempt to underplay selfish motives assuming that altruistic motives would meet with more approval. However, the term 'altruism' is not only loosely defined; it is also, as Volz (2001) points out, fraught with ambivalence. Altruistic motives may be regarded as purely masking personal benefits and as a consequence can acquire derogatory meanings.

Notwithstanding these caveats and the significant interplay of themes, respondents' reflections on their motivation for community activism were interpreted in three different ways:

- Those who were loosely speaking approaching the question from a personal, sometimes utilitarian angle, reflecting on the benefits of voluntary action to **themselves**, and as such answering the question 'what is in it for me'?
- Those who outlined the **trajectories and pathways** into their involvement, thus concentrating on how they got involved originally.
- Those who concentrated on the essence of 'why' and offered their perspective on the **theoretical underpinnings** of their activism.



**Figure 2      Motivational Tensions**

Some respondents stayed within a distinct category, for example they exclusively talked about personal benefits or concentrated on their pathways. For others, their answers were presented in a more complex pattern and respondents themselves suggested links between all categories. For those people the data will be presented in terms of the most prominent focus.

## Benefits to 'self'

The benefits that people saw for themselves were by far the most extended category of responses and also straddled all other categories. The voluntary nature of people's involvement was in itself likely to emphasise personal rewards, and made into something that was quite different from other activities

....you're not pressurised, it's not a job, it's something you can enjoy and you feel that you are doing something for people with no pressure from them or pressure from you, you know<sup>28</sup>.

All respondents therefore, to some degree, referred to personal benefits; for example following religious imperatives, spiritual fulfilment or achieving political goals have their own intrinsic personal benefits and these were referred to throughout the interviews.

Given the abundance of personal benefits that people saw for themselves it was interesting to note that people were generally making little attempt at masking their benefit in any kind of 'altruistic' way. However it was apparent that there seemed to be an implicit code for which forms of personal benefit were seen to be socially acceptable and which ones were not. Some of the women for example tried to distance themselves from a motivational stance that seemed to concern itself primarily with positions of power and esteem

Well I don't do it because I want to be recognised or anything like that.

...I don't do it because I want to walk around and say here I was secretary of the community centre – I would never do that in a million years...

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<sup>28</sup> Although there is now some evidence that volunteers can experience a significant amount of stress and people are now also expressing adverse effects on their health.

Similarly, another respondent associated the motivation to aspire to positions with a lack of sincerity, which he then felt would get in the way of achieving the group's aims:

If you've got some people ...looking for a position – sort of gaining personal things you know, then that thing cannot work.

Benefits relating to power and esteem are a dimension that would be worth exploring in their own right, especially, as the quote above suggests, how these interact with the stated aims of voluntary groups. In this study, these aspects of motivation were alluded to and might well have been present, but were only expressed in the above, indirect way and will therefore not be pursued independently.

For the purpose of data evaluation, the following section will consider the responses of those people who had exclusively or predominantly talked about their personal benefits and for whom the actual nature of their involvement was presented as being secondary. The resulting benefits referring to 'self' can be grouped into the following sub-categories:

1. Utilitarian benefits
2. General wellbeing
3. Social benefits
4. Benefits from groups
5. Self realisation

### *Utilitarian / Instrumental*

At this end of the spectrum, voluntary engagement was primarily seen as a ‘stepping stone’, an activity that filled a temporary gap and provided a range of useful, transferable experiences. These, coupled with access to relevant training and the accompanying qualifications, were seen to be particularly useful in order to move on, mainly to gain paid employment. Voluntary involvement in this case was very much regarded as an activity that arose from a temporary need and would not be continued if the need came to an end or when another (in this case paid) opportunity arose. Accordingly, one respondent explained that there was no previous history in her family of voluntary involvement of any kind as “they all worked full-time”. This was not only regarded as a ‘time’ issue, but one of ‘need’, as repeated references were being made to the benefits of voluntary action, as they offered opportunities to ‘move on’. For one respondent this was one of the most obvious benefits, and that she and others in her position no longer “needed to be doing things voluntary”. These views need to be contrasted with others<sup>29</sup> who also discussed professional and vocational benefits, but where these were presented as an unexpected by-product rather than the primary motivating factor. In these cases voluntary activism led to career changes or opened up new opportunities and developed skills that were then transferred to professional and employment settings.

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<sup>29</sup> Also see Chapter 4 – section ‘Impact’



## *Well-being*

The impact on people's general sense of well-being has been well documented in studies on volunteering and learning (Aldridge and Lavender 2000) and was also frequently cited by respondents in this study. The main observations here predominantly referred to mental health benefits and the therapeutic effects that voluntary involvements can have:

With me being disabled and being on the sick its better than staying at home and looking at the same four walls seven days a week – it keeps you occupied and you're not getting depressed or suicidal I don't think. I would get depressed if I was at home doing nothing.

I just know I'm happy doing it. I have a sister, ...she'll say I couldn't be bothered with that and...she's what I would call ... she's more miserable, she's not happy with her life whereas I am.

When my husband and my daughter died within a short time I thought that was the finish but it wasn't and I don't believe in just sitting back and feeling sorry for yourself, that's not my way.

These reflections also support the claim of Schuller et al (2002) that, similar to the effects of learning, voluntary activity can have a stabilizing and maintaining role that often can prevent a crisis from occurring in the first place. In contrast to more transformative aspects, these stabilizing and maintaining properties of voluntary engagement are documented less frequently in the literature. Generally, the perceived benefits were closely related to the lack of choice that many respondents felt they had. The question of choice, or absence of choice, was a recurrent and significant feature of people's responses. Especially those who were older, had a disability or felt restricted because of their circumstances, welcomed the opportunities that community activities offered them:

With a young child there was not anything else I could have done. I couldn't go to work and the time I was spending at the centre was just right for me.

It gets you away from them [the grandchildren]. Its right though because once you do your little bit with them ... because there are a lot of people – oh we've got the grandchildren to get to school, we can't do this, we can't do that, well their lives are just ebbing away and they are doing nothing.

Older people in particular talked about the fact that their voluntary activities safe-guarded them from the demands that their families might place upon them, such as baby-sitting and childcare. They therefore felt that being actively involved in their community reduced their general and presumed availability to others and gave them the kind of legitimate excuse to turn down unwanted requests:

If you are out and about you've got an excuse to say to you daughter or your sons we cannot baby-sit today because we've got this to do and that's what we do.

### ***Social benefits***

Social aspects were generally referred to by a wide range of respondents. In many cases it was the social aspects that went hand in hand with the benefits of health and mental health, especially for those who were in transition in their lives and were looking to replace social networks. Retirement, like unemployment, is unlike other forms of transition as they often imply a change from structure to no or less structure. With this loss of structure other aspects of what paid work also provides tend to disappear, for example self esteem, social contacts and a sense of purpose (Jahoda 1983). Accordingly, studies on ageing and retirement draw attention to the fact that for many people retirement provides a trigger for establishing new social contacts (Barnes and Parry 2004). However, in this study, the loss of structure that some of the women reflected upon as a result of children leaving home, or leaving work to look after a family, often mirrored the feeling of those in retirement. One of the benefits that was most frequently referred to, in addition to factors such as enjoyment of the activity and needing to feel useful, was the provision of a much appreciated range of social networks. In this case the

nature of the activity was very much seen to be secondary to the kind of social opportunities it provided:

If the ... group folded I would have to go and do something else.

On a simple level this clearly led to an extension of friendship networks:

Well it's to get socialising with people and all that. Going out with people and meet people

I like being involved in a group with people because you make a lot of friends

If it wasn't for this group I don't know what I would be doing. I can always phone somebody up and I can always find someone who I could go out with.

For others, their activity brought a particular infra-structure and opportunities for engagement:

You get the experience you see from knowing all these people, you hear all the different stories and you know what makes them all tick kind of thing. You get to know their natures and its just wonderful being able to be in contact with them all the time.

It's just a few hours a week and you are talking to people, people coming in; you are trying to help, we chat to them, people on the telephone, using the computer.

I think in the beginning it was really interesting just to meet loads of new people and make lots of different friends and then you found out a lot more about people.

### ***Impact of Groups***

In addition to the social aspects of working with others, many people reflected on the particular benefits that arise from working in groups and how the dynamics of groups themselves added to the benefit of their members. This seemed to be a particularly important aspect for some of the older respondents, who felt that being in a group helped them to counteract some of the restrictions they felt because of their age. This could have a very practical (and also reciprocal) dimension:

You can't really go out walking yourself in case something happens, you might break a leg or something so basically you need some people to go out with.

Some people have got to have somebody with them to begin with or else they've got sticks and that and they haven't got the confidence to do it on their own but if they are with other people they are fine.

... You could say roughly, I don't know what's the word – you do yourself a favour really by getting them to come out with you – that's what I'm doing, getting them to come and join me you see and with them joining me I can go out myself.

Others commented on the positive dynamic of groups as “people will do things with a group that they wouldn't do on their own”. In addition to the practical aspects people talked about the value of peer support and the general encouragement that can arise from a group activity:

You do things that you wouldn't have done normally and it's because people of the same age encourage you to do it. If you were left on your own sitting at home you would never ever do these things but because you are in a group of people and everybody cheers you on you do things, you push yourself more than you would if you weren't in a group.

### ***Self realization***

The search for opportunities for self realisation was an undercurrent in a number of the interviews and in some cases was linked to some of the spiritual reflections that are explored in more depth later in this chapter. However, references to self realisation as a motivating factor for community activity were most forcefully made in the less ‘official’ sections of the interview or in addition to the explanations that were already offered previously. It is on these occasions that the issues arising from narratives became most apparent and brought out the difference between what Bruner calls “a life as lived, a life as experienced and a life as told”:

A life lived is what actually happens, a life experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts and meanings known to the person whose life it is...A life as told, a life history, is a narrative influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience and by the social context (Bruner 1984:7, in Denzin 1989:30).

It became apparent that the “story told” was influenced by the way the respondents perceived the context and the parameters in which their story would be told and needed to reflect what they would perceive as the dominant discourse. This mirrored the findings of Linden West who outlines how, for instance, students entering Higher Education justify their decision by constructing a narrative that reflects society’s value placed on professional qualifications, whereas the real motivation behind these official stories are much more complex and are more related to personal fulfilment and Higher Education is used to “compose a new life, a different story and a more cohesive self” (West 1996:10).

Using the example of two older women (one 67, one 84) it appeared that there was a layer of motivation that could not be easily accommodated in the other categories outlined above. The central theme that emerged here was one of long-held, suppressed frustration that the women felt they could not voice within the normal parameters of their lives. One woman talked in a very animated way about how her current activities were a reflection of changing times; she now had opportunities that were not open to her as a young woman and her own aspirations were severely restricted in her youth:

...even me going to a grammar school, unless you came from a particularly academic family you’re highest goal was to be a secretary. I wanted to be a hairdresser you know – that was the highest that you thought you could achieve...

Her perspective on these restrictions was further compounded by the demands placed upon her through an early marriage and childcare responsibilities, with very few options to pursue her life in a different manner:

I didn't have a particularly co-operative husband, he worked but that was it, it was still the old dinner on the table when he comes in so I always consider I brought them [the children] up by myself and I think I was that busy ... there definitely wasn't the help that the young girls have now – there were no nurseries, you couldn't say well I'm sick of this marriage..

Through her reflections on her own path through life she was also beginning to suggest similarities between her own experiences and those of other women:

even if you don't want to think that way you do start thinking that women have always been disadvantaged and I find a lot more leaning towards that sort of thing and education is a big thing for women because ... after the 2<sup>nd</sup> World War... – we as a generation – we coming up in the 50s and the 60s ... you were at home to build up the new generation – so many young men had been killed and everything so you were really being used and you stayed at home and you looked after your children and brought them up and that was it, your education went so far because you were needed to start off the new generation....

Having completed an Open University degree and gone through a divorce late in life, this respondent, because of her age, saw few other outlets for her newly found freedom and qualification. She embarked on voluntary community involvement although she had never thought that would be something she would become interested in.

Another woman, in her mid 80s, talked in quite a conspiratorial tone about her lifelong quest for independence. Even as a young girl she had wanted to do other things and she did not like the expectations that were placed upon her as a young woman. She further talked about the way she consistently, throughout her life, had found ways of asserting herself, often against the odds. With much humour at times, she talked about the way she had circumvented or ignored some of the restrictions placed on her and how she

consistently tried to find her own way. Even at this stage she was proud of her independence:

I think I'm very independent..... like in the house if anything happens I'm not going to call a man, I'm going to try and do it first. ....and you feel great because you think I've done that and I didn't have to ask a man to come in and do it.

Looking at her life now, she felt that the things she was involved in were confirmation of her skills and talents and her aspirations that were held, harboured and nurtured for a very long time:

But I think a lot of it stems from your childhood and you know when they sit these exams and that well when I was 11 you didn't call it – you called it a scholarship in them days, not the 11+ it was the scholarship and I passed that and of course I had to say I wasn't going you see so the teacher said I'm giving you a letter for your parents so I took the letter home and it as for one of them to go and have an interview with the school as to why and of course my mother went and she said well I've got five of them, she's got a job waiting and she's got to go to work so that was it, I didn't go to any grammar schools or anything. .... and that was why because I thought I will do it some day. It's took all this time but I thought I will do it some day. This is not going to stop me and I was annoyed really.

These accounts seem to confirm the perspectives of some feminists who have suggested that women are not so much in need of awareness raising, but more in need of finding outlets for their awareness, as many have a long tradition of 'revolting silently'. Both of these women portrayed their current activism as a continuation of a lifelong quest for independence; a culmination of little steps trying to overcome limitations placed upon them, demonstrating that they could "reach new understandings of their biographical selves" (Williamson 1998:24).

## **Pathways**

Reflecting on how people got involved in community activism in almost all cases prompted a conversation about the respective paths that people had taken and what they

took their starting points to be. In some cases the perceived pathways were closely linked to people's theoretical underpinnings, i.e. how they made sense of their involvement in ethical, spiritual or political terms. In other cases the more predominant link was made to a direct, personal need. These interconnections and interdependencies will be explored in more detail later.

The pathways the respondents highlighted have been grouped into the following categories:

- As a direct response to a life-changing event
- As a result of being a member of a group
- As being culturally determined.

### ***Individual - Life Events***

The role of change in circumstances or a 'crisis in lifeworld' is well documented as a contributor to a decision to take part in learning (Walker 1998) or volunteering, as indeed is the role of trauma by theorists of critical thinking (Brookfield 2000:5). Denzin (1989:22) claims that the idea that lives are turned around by significant life events is firmly established in Western thought and narratives are therefore typically structured around these events that he refers to as "epiphanies". Similar sentiments are expressed by Giddens who talks about "fateful moments", "when individuals are called on to take decisions that are particularly consequential for their ambitions, or more generally for their future lives." (1991:112). Accordingly, for the people in this study who talked about personal reason for their involvement, their most prominent references were to changes



or crises in their lives that required them to re-evaluate and re-think previous patterns of behaviour. External triggers for change, especially for women, came from life changing events such as leaving work to start a family or children growing up and leaving home and as a result suffering from the 'empty nest' syndrome. For others, divorce, bereavement and retirement were cited as major turning points. As a result, many people were confronted with experiences, and at times dilemmas, that severely tested assumed truths and prompted people to critically reflect on values, assumptions and beliefs and re-assess their validity.

### **Loss**

References to formative events took a variety of forms. Many of these were initially associated with a sense of loss. Periods of transition such as unemployment and retirement for example often brought with them a loss of structure that left "a hole to be filled". For others a decision to "go out and do something" was regarded as a response to dealing with the emotional upheaval that accompanied bereavement:

When I left work I felt as if someone had just pulled the plug and I was left with a void. No children at home, a husband who was still working and I needed something to fill the void...

When I came here 11 years ago I had just lost my husband and a few months before that I had lost a daughter and I thought I've got to do something.

In most cases, the need "to do something" was clearly related to the lack of social integration and focus that life changes such as retirement or bereavement brought about. Similarly, with the end of long term caring roles, either for children or partners, significant gaps appeared that people felt very uneasy about and did not feel they had many options for filling. The alternative was often portrayed as a very limited, isolated

and passive existence, which came from a very restricted range of options that are perceived to be available to people once they drop out of 'normal' family configurations for example, or once they reach a certain age. The limited options for older people in particular were a recurring feature in the interviews (and will be looked at in some more detail later) as indeed were comments relating to social class where limited funds were seen as a compounding limitation

I got divorced after a very long marriage and all of a sudden I was sitting around thinking wow, what am I going to do here, how am I going to keep busy, don't want to be a couch potato...

### **New opportunities**

For others a change of circumstances was welcome as it offered the opportunity to explore different ways of being and perhaps fulfil ambitions that people felt could not have been voiced openly before. On a practical level this was particularly the case with some of the older respondents who may have had caring responsibilities or where the partner's restricted abilities had also affected the choice that they could make themselves. This was especially pronounced with married couples where it was suggested that limiting individual choice was a natural or inevitable consequence of being part of a couple; it would not have been possible to pursue an interest as an individual.

Well, I didn't get to do so much walking you see because my wife was an invalid and I used to take her different places you know and when she died it gives more scope really.

For others the limiting effects of a marriage were not indirect, but a much more explicitly restricting force overall. With the end of marriage a whole new range of possibilities opened up - for some the chance of "being allowed to be a different person".

When my marriage failed that was the making of me

The marriage I was in would have never allowed me to be able to come here and be my own person

I think I was just kept down a bit

I would have liked to have gone further, but situations have never let me do that.

These comments echoed some of Veronica McGivney's observations on what she refers to as "dispositional barriers", which are directly related to people's expectations and beliefs about their ability to change significant aspects of their lives. Hedoux (1981) in McGivney (1990) argues that decisions to participate in, for example, education and training are intimately connected with people's ability to control their lives and anticipate the future. For 'radical' non-participants this ability is blocked, for instance if their autonomy and freedom is restricted by their personal circumstances.

Similar to some of the sentiments discussed earlier, retirement and divorce especially for women, brought opportunities to pursue interests and develop a different way of life that was not open to them before, especially because of traditional role expectations:

Really I was looking to build a new life I suppose. When you are bringing children up and things like that you don't have time to make lots of friends. Now I have time to make a lot of women friends which I never have

I think now I've just come into my own really, over the past 12-13 years. I hate that thing – you going out to find yourself you know – well I didn't look for myself, you just suddenly find I'm this person that I wouldn't have thought I was years ago.

A change of personal circumstances can often also bring a change to established patterns and with that access to new activities. Women in particular talked about the birth of their children being the starting point for a whole range of new networks such as, for example, joining parent and toddler groups and through those meeting new people and developing new interests. This then led to further activities and also opened up a more sustained

involvement in other forms of community action. Not all of these new involvements were made out of choice, as some people felt that becoming part of a community activity was one of the very few options that remained available to them. One woman started coming to the community centre to take her child to playgroup. As she had to stay on the premises, she volunteered as something to do to fill in the time. She initially helped out with the food co-op and then with the community café. She felt that was pretty much the only thing she could do, as she had a small child and had to stay anyway. For others having a child also meant giving up work and wanting to fill in time with activities, perhaps through extending an existing involvement or seeking opportunities that made use of existing skills:

I got involved in being a Director; this is all before my son was born. Once he was born I left work then they persuaded me to do a bit more. I was ready to do a bit more and that's where I took on a greater role and started helping with the collections at the Teams office and doing a bit of extra work. I took on the role as minutes secretary.

In addition to life changing events precipitating community activism, one participant also talked about a 'life crisis' of a different form. She was invited to reflect on her life as part of an exercise on a training course and realized she "did not have one interesting thing to say about herself". For her, this proved to be what Giddens (1991) called a "fateful moment" as the experience became the starting point for a general reflection on her life and a growing realization of how dissatisfied she was and how she was looking for more of a purpose. On telling her story to a colleague she was given the contact for an outdoor education organisation looking for volunteer instructors. Her subsequent involvement triggered a further set of 'fateful moments' for herself and her daughter, leading to a significantly altered life pattern, a range of new interests and qualifications, a new husband, a new baby and a pending career change.

### ***Group Membership***

The importance of groups had a dual impact on participants. As shown above they were seen as being a benefit in their own right, but were also now talked about as a pathway into collective endeavours. The significance of an 'associational life' has been explored by a number of writers in a variety of contexts. Elson et al (1995), in their study on voluntary organisations in Britain, have highlighted the close relationship between group membership and learning. Group membership has also become a central and much cited aspect of social capital theory (Putnam 2000) and features prominently in studies relating to citizenship and civil society (Pattie et al 2002, 2004). Similarly, informal educators and youth workers have regarded the opportunities for association as a prime site for social education and democracy (Smith 1991, 1994; Doyle and Smith 1999).

This significance was borne out by respondents who traced back their current involvement and activism to being a member of a (different) group to start with. There appeared to be people who were seeking out groups as 'habitual joiners':

I used to be in the hotel trade so I was always in the staff association there. I was in a tap and ballet class and then I was in a Scottish dancing class and various things but since I came here it's been the drama group and then the writers group but I was also a secretary in the community centre.

However, there were others who traced their interest in community activism and their current activity back to being a member of a group and to the opportunities that arose directly from being involved:

I think it was mainly with my involvement as school council. I was involved in the school council in year 9 when I was about 14 and I had been involved prior to that as well and I was asked if I would come along to the development group of the youth assembly –

I was involved in the justice and peace group at Immaculate Heart Church and the priest – there was a few of us and he said would you help set up the credit union

I was employed by Gateshead Citizens Advice Bureau .....when I left the job eventually I continued to be a member of the credit union and I maintained contact with some of the people there and they actually asked me if I would get involved as a volunteer and join the board of directors.

References to “one thing leading to another”, of groups themselves becoming the conduit or stepping stone for other activities, were a feature in many of the accounts. People talked about how group membership led to more and changed involvements, either taking on different or more active roles or becoming more aware of issues that they wanted to engage with.

### ***Culture- Families***

For some people families and established norms within them seemed to have played a very distinctive role. References were made to being brought up in particular ways and for some people community involvement and collective action were closely linked to voluntarism and a generally helpful disposition that required you to look out for others:

So I was brought up as someone who helped. I've always been brought up in a helping environment and I think that rubs off as you get older.

I don't think its something that you ever lose. If you are brought up to be not selfish I think it makes a big difference.

I treat elderly people with a lot of respect because that's the way I'm brought up – I'm brought up to respect my elders.

It was noticeable in this context that many of the women respondents in particular talked about their early conditioning into caring roles, especially within families. Taking an active role within local communities was then seen as a natural progression:

Because I was the eldest of five and I had everything to do. I was born in 1921 and in those years things were very difficult. Bringing up five people must have been really quite hard. But I used to do most of everything and I think by the time I was 14 I was a woman not a child and I wonder if it's from doing all that then and I've just kept on going on that way.

.I think when you come from a big family you have to consider other people's feelings apart from your own ...we always had to take our turns washing dishes, set the table, cooking meals when we were old enough so we always had to share and take part in everything that was happening within the home and I have done the same with my children and I think it brings you up to be more ... personally I think it brings you up to be more caring, more nurturing I suppose.

For others family influence was less seen as nurturing a helpful attitude, and more about cultivating a generally positive disposition that encouraged people to take active roles in their lives:

They [my parents] did encourage me to have a positive outlook on things, to go about life in an active and positive way.

I think I've always had that – I think it was coming from my parents as well – it's always been that – try to do that positive thing, trying to do things that can help people. I think I've always had that attitude where putting my own experience into things and letting people learn from that and I think that's just the way that I do quite a lot of the work that I do.

Some respondents very clearly rejected the idea of their views being formed by their families; a range of different reasons were cited for this. They indeed felt that their views were in direct opposition to their parents' views, also pointing out their perspective on the political dimension of community activism - that community mindedness goes with particular political positions and not others. One person responded that he could not have gained his views from his parents as his father was a "Tory all of his life...and [his] parents were the most un-community minded people".

### ***Culture - Religion***

For some people attitudes relating to others were closely linked to being brought up within a particular religious frame-work. In particular, the non-Christian respondents<sup>30</sup> very clearly and without hesitation talked about their current attitudes being consistent with their religious upbringing:

It is my religion really., it's part of my nature, that's the way we were brought up – my father said I'm giving you this education, it's not only for yourself, it is for others – if you have an education, you must use your education to help others.<sup>31</sup>

My philosophy of a human being is that you come here, or rather sent here..., by some force whatever you call it, God or something to do some job, ...to do something for his people ...You can't be doing his will if you are ignoring your own self, ...and your own family and your own community, your own country, if you are ignoring you are not doing his will you know. So that's my philosophy and that's what I try to do.

My philosophy is ....that he has sent you or anybody else here to do his job and his job is to look after his people, the people he has created, the life he has created, the environment he has created, the things he has provided; to look after them, to act with them, not to destroy them you know and help ... not ignoring the essentials of their own, your tools you know. You are a tool but if you are looking after the tool you know, you can't do anything.

Others traced their involvement back to a church activity. Even when religious beliefs were not expressed explicitly, involvement in church activity was portrayed as being on a par with a certain kind of selfless attitude that produces a consistent willingness to contribute to the wellbeing of others on a voluntary basis, or beyond the call of duty;

I don't know, its always been – I've been involved in the church, the voluntary church and I want people to be happy really – I was a primary school teacher as my job so you do lots of things for children besides your job for them to be happy people you know and you put a lot of extra time in and just do something for the community.

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<sup>30</sup> One Sikh, one Muslim

<sup>31</sup> when people reflected on their family influence, religious and political references were usually attributed to fathers, whereas issues of upbringing, and generally nurturing attitudes were associated with mothers.



### ***Key individuals***

One aspect that was noticeable for almost all respondents was the reference to key individuals who acted as a major mobilizing force. Many people could trace their involvement back to those who encouraged, informed, and cajoled them. These accounts indicate the crucial role that other individuals play in encouraging people to become involved in a new activity. This was particularly so for people whose ‘way in’ followed a life crisis or who were looking for a new activity for social reasons, or even if they were not particularly looking for one: <sup>32</sup>

Well I was coming up to retirement age in 1999 and **my sister** said to me, what are you going to do when you retire and I said what do you mean, I’m going to sit in the garden, I’m going to read books and have a whale of a time – and she says doing what, just sitting around

I had never gone out, I’d brought a family up but never to go out and join groups or do anything like that so **this lady up the street** asked me would I come up and join this adult school

**My sister in law** – she gave me the phone number for this outdoor activity place so that’s what started me off

I was telling **my friend** who I give a lift to work who knew ... and I’d like oh you know I never do anything and I don’t know what to do and she mentioned oh well they are looking for people to volunteer with this thing in Gateshead.

It really started for me when I started getting interested in environmental politics when I was 18 or 19 and when I moved to the North East. **I’d been given a lift by an army officer** when I was hitch hiking in Scotland and we were talking about environmental issues and he said have you heard of Friends of the Earth and I hadn’t so I found out about Friends of the Earth and actually when I moved to Newcastle from Manchester I joined Friends of the Earth.

In addition to providing an initial impetus key individuals also played a significant role in guiding and encouraging people to progress to different activities and to take on more active roles. The impact of key individuals on motivating people to get involved in activities is well documented and equally as predominant in other, related fields. Studies on pathways into learning (McGivney 1990, 1999) for example highlight the importance of personal contacts and established networks. Similarly, studies on recruiting volunteers

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<sup>32</sup> Even those people who chose activities, for example for political reasons, traced their original pathways back to particular individuals.

(Ellis 2004, Verba et al 1995) draw attention to the crucial importance of ‘mobilisation’ - even if all other contributing factors are in place, i.e. people have the time, can see the need for their work, have the necessary resources, think their work is going to be effective, they are crucially more likely to get involved if someone asks them to do so:

You have done the course — **the [outdoor education] instructors**, said why not start a club up yourselves. ...

..., so they **[the community education workers]** got us all together here in the hall and said you’ve all enjoyed each other’s company and you want to keep on doing it – why don’t you form your own group so this is how this group came about

I was involved in the justice and peace group at Immaculate Heart Church and **the priest** – there was a few of us and he said would you help set up the credit union in Dunston, to become part of the study group.

Well, I was nominated actually by **one of the teachers** who said would you go along to this meeting and find out what it’s all about.

In this context it is striking that the advice or encouragement came from an extremely wide and diverse range of individuals and professional groups (rather than, for example, from experts in guidance work). More important than a particular form of professional expertise seemed to be an existing relationship, or trusted networks, often established over time, confirming the power of both ‘word of mouth’ information and the effect of role models and mentors.

## **Theoretical Underpinnings**

In addition to outlining their pathways to voluntary activism and the benefits that they were deriving from it, some respondents also focused on their theoretical perspective, offering explanations as to why they thought their kind of involvement was important.

Although there is some degree of overlap, these reflections roughly fell into the categories of those who drew on spiritual concepts, those who reflected on their ethical stance and those who offered a critical, broadly political perspective.

### *Spiritual*

Some people reflected on the impact on their own lives in a broader and more philosophical way, in that they referred to what they considered to be the essence and purpose of life. One respondent referred to collective, co-operative ways of working as being the central aspect that unites human beings and has the capacity to transcend the boundaries that are artificially created. In this context, the purpose of intervention is to bring out these common aspects of different people:

... as you know; in any country, at any level, at any place; I've been actually to various places, India, Bangladesh, Canada, America and the continent in various countries and I found this: that everywhere at any time there are people of different levels of intelligence, of culture, ... they are different but one thing is common, that they are all bound by a spiritual force and that, they might call it religion, they may call it anything they like but they are bound by something which is very, very common, which is spiritual ... whatever you may call it here and those are positive things and if you bring them together and remove misunderstandings they act almost in the same way, they work together, they act together, they live together but yes there are sometimes you know, some places where some help is needed so what I am trying to do is just trying to help ...

These sentiments were echoed on an individual level, as people were looking for a form of 'central life force', an activity that went beyond a utilitarian worldview and gave some kind of broader meaning to life. Occasionally this was a direct response to a change in life-circumstances that removed a particular caring role, for example when children left home or because people started retirement; times of transition when issues of self and identity become more prominent and need to be negotiated in different terms (Courtney 1992):

I needed something to fill my life and the need was there for someone else. If it had been something else you know – it wasn't specific

Interesting here was the way people portrayed their voluntary involvement as being in contrast to a boring, limited, mundane existence, indicating again, indirectly, the limited options they otherwise saw for themselves. Many of the responses were expressed in a polarised way, as two opposing ends of a spectrum, where their activism was less described as a positive choice but more as a result of limited options:

I like having those little extra things in my life rather than just sitting in front of the box all the time<sup>33</sup>

.I think if you go out socialising a lot or drinking and out for meals and things I'm sure that fills the gaps but if you don't do that then you've got to have something else. I couldn't just sit in front of the box every night.

I'm not a boozier you see so I didn't fancy sticking with the bottle and four walls.

Many people went beyond the discussion of limited choices and said that they were looking for 'meaning' and 'purpose' in life, something that was absent in other activities and pursuits. This was expressed through the need to have aspects of life in general that went beyond duty and obligation and transcended the more mundane elements:

I think beforehand, before this I used to have a sort of – there's got to be more to life than just getting up and going to work – **there's got to be more to life than this and I think this showed me I can live more.**

I mean where I live you know people, yes, they go to work, they go shopping and so on and so on but they don't do anything, they are not involved in any single thing **other than those basic parts of their life** and I couldn't.

I used to work in an office and I liked the job I was doing... I never saw an end result – I was just doing my job and that was it, I'd come home, it was an office job – **it was nothing to give me a real sense of achievement.**

Well I've gone from being someone who just went to work through the day and came home on a night and thought well what will I do with myself to actually have **a sense of purpose on something else in my life that made me into who I am.**

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<sup>33</sup> It was interesting to note that watching the television was frequently referred to as the undesirable alternative to activism – a point that features prominently in Putnam's arguments on the formation of social capital, i.e. that associational life is adversely affected by the entertainment industry (Putnam 1995, 2000)

This pattern of describing the perceived options was very common throughout and I was particularly struck how this transcended both gender and age, as these quotes from an 84 year old and a 17 year old respectively demonstrate:

Well imagine if you didn't do this. You are sitting in the house, doing your housework, whatever and you are either watching television or you are sitting looking at the four walls, what life is that?

Because I like doing things in my spare time instead of sitting in the house doing nothing and being bored. Instead of going out spending all my money on nowt and that.... just something to do and I think it's really worthwhile as well.

These sections in the interviews, and the last quote in particular, seemed to confirm some of the observations that were made about the limitations arising from a 'post-modern perspective' that suggest that the opportunities to make life style choices, choosing from the grand range of options without reference to tradition, morals, obligations and putting the self into the centre lead to a moral vacuum that is inhabited by "Ichlinge" [Me-lings] (Schuele 2006). According to Schuele, 'Me-lings' are devoid of history and ideology and their life experience is particularly determined by hedonism and fun and by an absence of durability. However, Schuele argues, 'Me-lings' get to the limitations of this approach, as economically they are stopped from pursuing their egocentric goals, and life-planning does not take place as a whole, but in sections and projects. Their growing disillusionment might have the consequence that young people start to look for other forms of meaning in life, for some form of predictability and stability – and therefore also look for a new form of 'we'. Schuele thinks that the effect of the pluralism of post-modernity (and the individualism) (i.e. the mental socialisation of ichlinge) means that people are looking less for the politics of the great parties, but are more mentally disposed to concentrating on smaller interest groups or small parties. However, as will be shown below, the relative disenchantment with 'big party', mainstream politics is not

only a reaction to post-modernity, but can also be seen as a the result of an analysis of power relationships within politics.

### *Ethical*

A further, extended dimension of the personal benefit is what one respondent referred to as 'enlightened self interest'. These contributions went beyond the immediate benefit for the individual and referred to an idealistic reflection or a first analysis of what constitutes 'society':

I just think if everybody was kind to each other and helped what a lovely world it would be, wouldn't it. .... It's just my outlook on life

For some this was expressed simply that " nobody is insular and ... you need other people", or "I wouldn't like to be a person that lived somewhere but didn't have a clue what was going on and didn't try to get involved in things". For others this reflected a particular take on their ethical position, which also began to highlight views on civil society and its reciprocal dimensions based on mutuality:

I think I have an understanding for myself - my personal politics is that you get out of society what you put into it and so, not for any altruistic reason but I feel as though I should put something into social community life if I want to get something back from it. I can't expect to get it on a plate and I think if I've got the benefit of being able to have time to do that and the resources to do that, then I should share that.

I think that the only way these things work is by people putting some of their time in and if everybody puts a bit of time in then it benefits everybody including yourself. I don't claim to be altruistic I just think everybody owes it to everybody else to play a part so that it benefits everybody else

Well I think you only get back what you give and I think that applies right through your life

Well – everything would grind to a halt if there was nobody prepared to take on these voluntary roles. There would be no focus in the village would there.

...it felt you were doing something for the community and in the way talk about it, it is just helping the area and you are doing worthwhile for the area that you live in.

It's my community. If you're helping it makes it a better place. You want to help the people around you because you like living there and you want to make other people happy – if it is making other people happy and you can devote an hour a week and you are able to do it where some people aren't and you know, they can't – I think that's a good thing.

For one respondent the obligation to contribute to his community arose from a spiritual force and was further elaborated on as being overlaid by a form of almost 'contractual' arrangement that outlined the reward of 'happiness' in return for adhering to your assigned role in life:

...I want to do it you know and ...you have to do it if you want to be happy. That's what I think – you can be happy only if you are doing his [God's] will.

It is interesting in this context how this perspective came close to those people's who cited 'enlightened self interest', in as much as the fulfilment of obligation included due regard to your own and others' needs, ensuring that your interests are met.

### *Political*

For some people the importance of voluntary community activism was clearly located within a perspective on human and public relationships and the respective distribution of power relationship within them. For this group of respondents, their perspective on society and its inherent inequalities stood at the forefront of their response. Voluntary community activism was regarded as an appropriate response, especially as an antidote to mainstream and statutory services. Some respondents felt they were confronted with injustices that they could not deal with in other positions and where they felt that community activism provided services directly to disadvantaged groups:

I started when I was doing the interpretation for the police department. I felt that there were a lot of things that were not right when I was doing it and I wasn't in a position – because I was doing the interpretation I was not allowed to take sides but I felt that a lot of injustice was being done which I could not say at that position but over the years – I've been doing immigration, I've been



doing all minor cases that have been happening, domestic violence and stuff – people have double standards, they were differently treated when it comes to the ethnic minorities they were differently treated to others.

A further political dimension raised in this context was that of voluntary activism in contrast to mainstream politics:

I found politics; politicians... they were not with the people which suited my attitude; I wanted to do something sincerely, without any gain so I found that most of the people were not of that character so the group we were in, about four or five people, decided that you could do without the politics, you could go into the villages and do the work they require. Education is one, health is another and there are so many social work schemes you could do even without money, what you needed was enthusiasm and volunteers, meeting other people you know. We found that politics was not absolutely necessary you know so that's why I oriented myself towards what we call constructive work

I was teaching in Delhi when I decided that politics is not for me because I was able to see politicians at close range; I also saw Ghandi dying, you know he was killed almost in front of my eyes by people who don't like you to do something for the problem people you know. So that also made me more determined to do something.

The young respondents in particular were very focused on the needs of young people and saw their activism as an effective route to ensuring that young people's needs were listened to and their rights were being met:

It was just as a young person I wasn't aware of what was out there for people and what chances there were which there obviously were there but I just think that young people need to know about it and sometimes don't feel confident enough to go and do things so its just to try and encourage them to take part in things plus it makes a difference.

Being on the youth assembly, being in the civic centre you can hear things from a couple of years back when the youth assembly first started. People say the youth assembly helped with this or this and a couple of big policies within the council have been affected by what we had to say as young people – sort of local agenda, 21, bus fares – it was just things that when you were a young person you think we've got no chance of being able to affect this and now being able to make a difference – obviously being a trustee of the youth council we still support the youth assembly to keep going and we've got the sort of things like the youth information shop which do make a difference to the 13 thousand young people coming through the doors a year so I think that's the difference in the motivation to listen to young people.

I still feel quite young myself but I think being involved in the early days I think we didn't realise what the potential was for young people to be listened to and I think there is a lot of young people still don't realise that they've got the right to be listened to under the UN convention especially article 12 people. People don't realise that they've got it and I don't want people to miss out I think, that's one of the biggest things I don't want people to miss out, I want people to be able to take things forward and be ... its like the 5 every child matters things isn't it, be healthy, stay safe,



make a difference, positive contribution, all that sort of thing I just think its what its all about really.

What also emerged from the above quotes is how the young people felt that their own views on the effectiveness of activism had changed through being involved. They themselves had realized that their views were being heard and real opportunities for change existed through mobilizing other young people. With that, the two most commonly cited motivational conditions for community action are in place – the belief in the inherent usefulness of the action and the likelihood of its success (Beierlein and Preiser 2005, Opp 1985, Pattie et al 2002):

Credit unions are a way of including everybody in access to financial services because a lot of people are financially excluded, they can't get bank accounts because they haven't got jobs or they are living a bit ... banks have given up on them and their only access to finance is very high rates of interest on legal loans from the Provi – or taking out loans with loan sharks who might do violence to them potentially so for a lot of people the only option is to pay very high rates of interest, so the poorest people often pay the most for access to credit, which seems somewhat ironic

In addition to a direct response to experienced injustice, voluntary action was also seen to be an appropriate vehicle for preventative work and effecting change on a broader basis:

My children have experienced racism in schools. ...we felt that something had to be done rather than being aggressive we can do it by educating people in those organisations

its to do with people having equal access to things although just for information we try not to encourage the idea that credit unions are only for poor people because they only work if they are accessible to everybody, even people who are reasonably comfortable financially can get benefit from them as well and by doing that – putting their money into the credit union allows it to be used by a broader range of people so the money is recycled

Get the widest possible access to the service so that the most people benefit.

Some people made direct reference to community activism and voluntary engagements being directly related to fostering a more understanding relationship between different sections within society. One young woman felt that we would have “better communities” if more young people like herself sought opportunities to work and engage actively with

older people. She felt that as a result young people would have a better awareness of older people and “the whole community would be able to enjoy themselves instead of being scared of kids – the old people get scared of kids taking the Mickey out of them and that”. The same sentiments were shared by another respondent:

... we involve various people from various cultures, various races, you know, we try to bring them together ... most of our activities are cohesive you know oriented and we think that they enjoy and also learn from reacting with each other.

I think its important – again its social inclusion because it cuts racism down, it cuts the differences between different communities and we treat everybody the same, we treat them all as one – we don't look at them as the colour, creed or religion, we just treat them as human beings and that's a good example. If you come to our mini mela you will see more or less about 15 nationalities attend and we just don't stop anybody, even English children – we encourage them to come and they can mix with the ethnic minority children and they learn their culture and they come to know what they do as well and that will cut the barrier down, the racism in schools especially. That is the main aim behind it.

I think that these communities are left out, they haven't got many facilities, they can't communicate with other people and they think, especially the asylum seekers, they haven't got families here, they can't enjoy the festivals of their own, their language barrier they see it as something different and people don't mix with them so there was a lack of most of the things like social inclusion was a problem so we thought that all these socially excluded children – we aimed at children first and that's how we got the families together.

Although the dimensions for people's reflections on their motivation to take part in community activism are presented in discreet categories it became apparent that there is an interconnectedness between them; categories are interdependent. For some respondents, reflections on their personal benefits and pathways were the pivotal points and little reference was made to any potential theoretical underpinnings. However, theoretical considerations were generally linked to a reflection on pathways, as people looked for the opportunities and structures that allowed them to act on their beliefs.

## **Chapter 4      CONTEXT / CONDITIONS**

This chapter concentrates on how people have experienced their community activism and on the circumstances and conditions that foster their involvement. Firstly, it covers the resources, in the broadest sense, that people felt they had at their disposal. Secondly, it outlines the impact people felt that their involvement had on themselves and their local communities.

### ***Resources***

The question relating to what kind of help and support encourages and facilitates community action brought about a very wide range of responses and people chose to look at this from a variety of angles. The question that was asked of participants was deliberately phrased in a broad way, as I wanted to see what people's interpretations of potential support were, rather than imposing a definition.

Accordingly, some respondents highlighted:

- the very practical support and the kind of facilities that groups require,
- learning and training opportunities, both for individuals and groups,
- the need for a supportive infrastructure and a shift in aspiration and confidence.

## Practical

Some people very emphatically drew attention to some of the very basic and practical conditions that need to be in place. Being constrained by family circumstances, such as caring responsibilities, for example, significantly affects people's ability to participate in a wide range of activities and clearly also applies to collective community activity. Research into participation into adult learning has recognised this for some time and much of the literature dealing with 'barriers to access' encourages adult learning providers to address some of these very practical constraints. Accordingly, for all women with childcare responsibilities who were interviewed for this study, what was required, without any hesitation and very emphatically was a "good babysitter":

Without my father in law and mother in law but mainly father in law I wouldn't have been able to do it. I've got children – I want to put the time in but I've got to rely on a babysitter. So I suppose without that I couldn't have done what I wanted to pursue. I may continue when they are older, once they are at school.

This response echoes the observations of feminist writers who have made the links between domestic responsibilities and the opportunities for political participation in the wider sense (Phillips 1991). However, these sentiments were also shared by older people, who as grandparents felt they had to juggle childcare responsibilities, which they felt were getting in the way of them getting actively involved in their communities. Some retired people talked about the fact that there was an unquestioned assumption that they were available for childcare as they "had nothing better to do", but that organisations inviting older people to participate did not generally consider the caring responsibilities of grandparents. A noticeable exception was an organisation that was run for older people by older people who specifically organised activities for grandparents and children. Other

than relying on informal family support, none of the participants mentioned that childcare was provided to specifically allow them to get involved in community action. However, for one woman, a single parent, the fact that she could bring her child along was clearly a much welcomed, essential aspect of her involvement. The need to get these 'basics' met was clearly in the forefront of many people's thinking.

As a single parent...because if they hadn't had crèches and I had to bring ... [my daughter] along I wouldn't have been able to do it. You kind of – well I can't do this because I've got a three year old daughter – I cannot spend a weekend away, I haven't got no-one to look after her so they said bring her along, somebody will look after her. It takes that sort of worry off you and you can concentrate on what you need to do without worrying about practical issues like that.

## **Learning & Training**

The majority of people who were interviewed reflected on the very wide range of learning opportunities that accompanied their voluntary involvement. Many reported on comparatively formal training, in some cases as a precursor to a new commitment:

...ever heard of [credit unions] before – you go on to a study group rather than just coming in later on – I did all the training and found out what it was about so it was very useful and the three of us that started are still helping out, still doing voluntary work.

Other learning was related directly to the kind of 'business' they were involved in, ensuring ongoing development, making sure that their group stayed on track, such as learning about new developments in their field of work, changes in legislation and general policy development. As a result this meant that some groups were increasingly becoming independent and self sufficient, were relying less on the expertise of other organisations, and instead started sharing their skills amongst group members:

We're on a map reading course at the moment and they are showing us how to read the maps properly, take the walks properly, better than we are going now and that course hasn't finished yet. By the time we've finished the course we should be qualified walk leaders and we can go anywhere.

We've had map reading, orienteering, we've just been on a one last week for how to walk up hills when you are on a walk and we go and we do all this so we are learning all of the time and then we know what to with the group.

I have done lots of courses here, First Aid, Food Safety and things.

Another significant area of training related to groups increasing their independence and working towards sustainability were courses that were related to general committee skills and how to run community based organisations:

Oh we have done all sorts of things ... all the practical things to do with running things, and first aid courses and how to be on a management committee.

There was a course came up in GVOC in Gateshead and I said I'd go so I went to that course at GVOC on book-keeping and they showed me what to do.

There were three of us went to another course at Centre for Life that Northern Rock put on and that was for running businesses.

For some people the availability of local learning opportunities associated with learning about community activities meant that their general confidence increased and they also received support to help with basic skills:

I never have been very confident writing – I can read all right, but not writing. This has got so much better with doing all the courses and through doing more of it. I tell you it has been good having the courses here; they need to be relaxed and friendly.

In some cases external training opportunities mainly served to boost confidence and to confirm that existing skills were indeed adequate for the new role:

...but I had worked in accounts and knew what was needed and when I went to this course it was exactly as I was doing so that was no problem.

Others very clearly saw the availability of learning opportunities as one of the main benefits of community involvement for themselves. People talked very proudly of the

certificates they received<sup>34</sup>, often listing an impressive collection. People were aware of the transferability of the skills that they acquired in this process, either more generally:

It's a chance for me to use some of my skills as well. I've left work – I wanted the chance to keep something going, helping other people while I'm not in work. It keeps me going as well. Hopefully I can use those skills.

or very specifically in terms of using these newly found (certificated) skills for employment. This was mentioned as a distinct and desirable feature and stories were being told about other community members who had found work and/or changed career as a result of their voluntary commitments.

On a group level respondents reported how much support 'in kind' initiatives receive by virtue of being attached to or associated with another established group or organisation:

They [the community association / adult learning centre] let us have the office which did help – that we don't pay rent for. Plus we do all our copying here which we don't pay for which is a lot of money because as I say we have 175 members and they get two copies every month plus forms that they have to send back to us, envelopes, that's the stationery.

On another, but equally practical, level people receive significant support from the workers that they have access to and who will provide assistance with acquiring resources and the skills to run their own affairs reliably:

Well we did used to get a lot of help and support from particularly .... when he was the community worker here. It was .... that organised a lot of stuff and we got grants.

...we learned a lot about acting and directing from [the local community workers] ....and the production side...

..... here at ...did help and he had a lady that worked with him as a secretary that came in and gave us ideas and also the people at Wing. There were a couple of people from Wing came and talked to us and said right you need to do this, this and this to start your club off. You need to get a constitution and you need various members to be team members so this is how we started off and we've just learned as we've gone along really.

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<sup>34</sup> This is particularly interesting for a discussion on the value of accreditation in community based learning.

It was also pointed out that in addition to needing practical / operational support, formal learning opportunities are not always appropriate; groups therefore tend to rely on low level ongoing support:

A lot of groups have trouble probably with the secretarial back up and some of them ... I mean lets face it a lot of us older ones are not computer literate and we run a computer class at Bensham Grove and things like that and I know a lot of older people ... are still talking about the cats whisker for the radio and the wireless and things like that so even if you want to change and modernise it takes you all the time to do the video and things like that –

Many people referred to the fact that people already come to community involvement with a whole range of relevant, transferable skills. Some of these were developed during previous working lives and others from involvement in other groups in entirely different settings:

There again we've got members that have been in other groups so they bring their knowledge.

Obviously some of the men have been in unions at work before they retired so they know how it goes on with speaking through the chair and all this kind of thing, minutes and agendas which I wouldn't have known because I've never been in meetings.

Then the chap that had said well I propose that Peter as Treasurer because he'd worked with money in other groups and he said ok I'll do that and then he said to me oh its getting a bit much for me so I said ok I'll take over and I always worked in accounts in an office so I knew about accounts, how to go on so I took over the Treasurer.

Elizabeth that's on the committee got her husband and she says well Terrence worked with boys clubs before and worked with transport – and I said by all means he can take that over, it's a nightmare so he joined the committee and became the transport co-ordinator as he says – transport executive.

First Aid – we have one of our members... teaches First Aid so she came along and took a group of people and taught First Aid.

There was a significant amount of sharing of skills and people also talked about the informal learning opportunities that arose from “getting on with the job” and how “we've learned how to do things as we've gone along”. Many people expressed their enjoyment of learning things together as a group, and saw the fact that there were “no experts” in the



groups as a distinct bonus that generated a particular camaraderie amongst their members.

## **Supportive Infrastructure**

In addition to learning opportunities and practical support, many respondents chose to talk about the general environment that fosters community involvement, reflecting on their experience of being involved in a range of decision making processes. In this context it became important for people to look beyond mere representation and to explore the mechanisms which make people's involvement effective and real.

Some of the young respondents especially talked about the importance of creating environments that actively encourage participation rather than young people's representation. Their experience of being invited to serve on a range of different committees and boards significantly shaped their responses to what kind of help and support is necessary:

...if the adults want them to be involved then its more about the adults changing I think and to encourage the young people to be involved. I think an example is kind of these board meetings and stuff – obviously I've said that I think young people should be represented but I think there are ways and means of doing it and I think sometimes have big boards and their idea of representation is to say oh well we will invite some young people to come on to the board which is a very daunting thing for a lot of young people and it's sometimes meaningless because they'll become withdrawn and feel like their contribution is not valued so I think the way they are involved needs to change and if that means the board meetings change...

...lots of people sitting round a table with suits in a formal environment can put a lot of young people off...

...because I think there needs to be more radical changes -I think its about the whole structure of board meetings and the jargon that people are using – half the time the young people that are questioned and half of the adults are relieved because they don't understand it but its this whole kind of – we all need to sit around a table and wear a posh suit and just have a discussion where

that's not necessarily the most appropriate way and its definitely not acceptable for young people, its all about dress, language and appropriate mechanisms...

These observations mirror findings elsewhere (Burns et al 2004a, Burns et al 2004b) that draw attention to the inherent danger of 'tokenism' within community participation approaches, where there is a confusion of the process of consultation with that of participation, and the need to create infrastructures that facilitate truly democratic processes. The latter in particular require support and training in order to put policies into practice. This discrepancy between 'theory' and 'practice' was shared by many other respondents who saw a significant gap between policies and the practical enactment on the ground:

Very few individuals are what you call bloody minded, very few people are bloody minded, most of them are tied up by the system so they go by the system or they use the system not to do something. It's the fault of the system

I'd say it's the system and there is something you know ... most of the things are on paper but on ground it's different. Say I go to education department, in the old days when you were here you know, on paper everything is there, anti racism work is there but when it came to ground people were not put there direct. At the moment it's really sad that in spite of the best policies of anti racism, anti racism work is suffering in Gateshead

At the heart of current government strategies is the desire to collaborate with local people on a large scale. Capacity building in this context therefore does not just mean increasing the skill base of local people, but also looking at the learning needs of other professionals. This seems to be particularly necessary as the concepts of community development, participation and engagement are no longer just the domain of community development workers as a discreet professional group, but increasingly become the requirements for a significantly wider group of professionals who may well have no tradition or background of working with people on a local level:

Its ... you know some people perhaps never come out of the council. They don't have many chances to come into contact, shall we say work on the ground. If you are working on the ground then you know

The solution is if people in places become more aware of their responsibilities towards the community but some of them are either lazy, not that much ... perhaps not aware that this hurts. Some of the people may not be aware that this [racism] really hurts. I can give you examples of so many where people are suffering.

I have this feeling and this is personal, this is what I've come up against – I don't work for the council so its them or just Gateshead – they have a kind ... they look down on voluntary workers ... a lot of people that do voluntary work have got a lifetime of experience behind them and then you get these council workers that come along because they are getting paid a wage and they haven't got the experience to know what they are talking about half the time, they are learning but they look down on a voluntary worker who is trying to tell them something. It's their condescending attitude I find with a lot of them. I think its getting a bit better but it now puts voluntary workers off and I think a lot of work gets done by volunteers

It's just that patronising attitude at times that gets you ...

The Neighbourhood Renewal Unit (2002) has picked up on this precise point and regards the development of skills for professional workers to effectively work with community groups as an essential aspect of its learning and development strategy:

Neighbourhood renewal asks civil servants and policy makers to work in new ways – supporting local communities, helping partnerships to work and providing services that are more responsive to local need. This requires new skills and understanding. Local Authority policy makers also need opportunities for learning and development... (Neighbourhood Renewal Unit 2002:17)

Accordingly, the Neighbourhood Renewal Unit's Learning Framework highlights the need to complement professionals' and practitioners' operational skills with a range of interpersonal skills, analytical skills and reflective behaviours. (2002:34-35). However, it was also pointed out that many professionals may well not have the skills to support community activism, but that others may also come from professional cultures with a different value base and which adhere to a different philosophy of work:

... very often the one thing that stops people from acting is that somebody somewhere is stopping them getting access to information and resources. Not that there is a lack of them its just that people are blocking your path to them. People often have got - they can easily allow you access to them but they block that for whatever reason, political or personal, if the information resources

and support are provided in the right way you can be very empowering to people but if they are provided in the wrong way then they will be very dis-empowering so because I work professionally in the environment I am very aware in my own practice that if I do everything for a group I work with or I dole out information piecemeal, only allow access when it suits me or if I hold on to resources and spend the money without allowing the group to practice using resources that ultimately is not beneficial to that group because they don't grow and learn so there is a kind of educational aspect to it.

One of the striking outcomes of this section is how much a general, community based infrastructure was seen to be a crucial source of help and support for community based activity. In addition to the practical support mentioned above, many groups and community activists relied heavily on a low level type of 'background' support from a range of people; some of these were community workers, or other professionals and prominent people. However independently individuals and groups behaved in other ways, the importance of 'significant' people was a recurring reference point. One woman reflected on other kinds of voluntary activities she had been part of, but ceased to be involved in, precisely because she had felt unsupported and she had very much wanted to have a "person to contact when needed". What seems to be of crucial importance here is that there are relationships in place that people feel they can draw on when and if required, often on an informal basis. In some instances this took the form of sustained (individual) mentoring. In other cases community workers were seen to be available and a much used resource to create links to wider networks, to provide low level background support, including advice and guidance on extending networks:

when we had people going to meetings that were quite formal there was a support worker went with them so that if they didn't understand anything then it could be explained so the young people can feel a bit more comfortable about it so that was kind of a first step

I have that sort of support with ...— we have regular meetings with... so there is always that kind of support but I was encouraged to go for it so they've always been supportive in that way and they are even more supportive now

there should be somebody who is there to support volunteers – at their job and their roles so that they've got someone who – if you have a training need or want to develop something – that you've got someone to go to and they can help with

Well if there are any problems or anything I just see P who is very good –

L..., [the local community worker] Well she puts ideas forward and comes forward with things you can do – do you want to do this ... she's been wonderful for this community centre

She [the local community worker] brings good ideas and she is always wanting you to do something else and wanting you to do this and do that.

D... here at L... did help and he had a lady that worked with him as a secretary that came in and gave us ideas and also the people at W... There were a couple of people from W... came and talked to us and said right you need to do this, this and this to start your club off.

The 'embeddedness' of active groups seemed to be a central feature of all the responses within this area of the interview. I am aware that this might partially be due to the fact that I negotiated access to interview participants via their community based networks. Nevertheless, people referred to the importance of networks from a number of different perspectives: Firstly, internally, as the quotes above indicate, local community workers became part of a 'resource' that groups and individuals could draw on, and secondly, community workers had a particular role to play extending the links that local groups and communities have externally, thus increasing the range of resources that become available to them and form part of their social capital. Although the availability of formal support (such as office space and specific training courses) was much appreciated, it was the sustained and informal support providing a permanent infrastructure that seemed to be of crucial importance. Low level, ongoing, mentoring for example was mentioned especially by groups who were trying to involve participants who had no previous history of community activism. This form of support could take many different forms. People talked about having pre-meetings on a regular basis, for example, or having somebody readily available to answer questions, to ease ways into existing networks, and to get help

with literacy and numeracy issues. In adult education and community / youth work there is an increasing emphasis on recorded outcomes and accreditation. (DFES 2002). As Spence (2004) points out, these recorded outcomes are often the “endpoint of a process of engagement”. It is the process itself however that was regarded by participants and workers alike as an outcome in its own right. This appeared to be most beneficial for community activists but the most difficult for workers to record and account for. The benefits derived from a sustained and readily available support network often replaced or supplemented the recorded outcomes that community workers were encouraged (and funded) to aim for. For example, rather than attending a training course, community activists learned skills ‘on the job’ from the community workers or supported each other with informal help and guidance from a professional. In other scenarios it was found that the confidence that people needed to engage in accredited learning (often with a different provider) was clearly linked to the ongoing informal networks ‘at home’, i.e. within their local communities and with ongoing support from a community worker, who also often consolidated the learning experienced elsewhere.<sup>35</sup>.

## ***Impact***

The perceived impact of voluntary / collective action shows similarities to the wider benefits of adult learning and mirrors many of the findings of Schuller et al (2002),

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<sup>35</sup> Many workers complained about the fact that the ‘outcomes’ were then attributed to other providers with little or no recognition that these could only be achieved with the ongoing, albeit unrecognised’ supportive infra-structure. (ref previous Gateshead research)

especially in terms of the transferability of skills, impact on health and social capital and social cohesion. Responses therefore can broadly be categorised under the following two headings:

- personal impact
- wider / societal impact.

Some people talked about their community involvement having led to a change in career and vocational aspirations. One young man for example had thought of a career in teaching, but felt that his involvement in young people's organisations and campaigns had heightened his awareness of young people's rights. He therefore chose to pursue his work with young people in a different way:

It really has changed my life. With all my involvement at school I actually spent three years in the 6<sup>th</sup> form. As you know, I came and did the ICE course with you. At the same time I was offered a place at University to do teacher training. I really had to think very hard about this and in the end I did not accept the place. Instead I have gone down a totally different route and I now have a job that I really love.

On a similar note some people felt that being involved in community based activities directly led to new opportunities or had brought out interests and skills that they did not think they had, linked with opportunities for further learning and training. They were now pursuing a different path in their lives:

...and now after about six years I've been with ... it's totally changed my life. Not so much the outdoor activities but it was working with groups – I got such a great buzz from it, I'd come away for a weekend and go to my office job and think what am I doing here, I want to be back out doing that and since then I've now got involved with working with youth groups and I'm now actually a worker and striving hard to get a qualification in it as well.

The biggest development is that I realise that youth work is something I wanted to do as a living - it's taught me what I want to do out of life. You suddenly realise that that's what I want to do.

In some cases training received as part of voluntarism equipped people with the necessary skills to gain paid employment as an unexpected by-product. For example one

woman who was looking for something to do while her child was attending playgroup got involved in running the community centre's food cooperative and community café is now working in the café part-time rather than returning to her previous job as a factory worker. She very much felt that that the vocational outcomes were the prime benefits of the training opportunities that community activism brought with it. She talked about other people, especially women, who as result now had paid employment in jobs that were more satisfactory and suitable to their role and the needs of parents of young children:

I am now a paid worker. It has been ideal for me with the small children. The hours really suited and I did the courses here too. I used to work in a factory, but now this is much better with the hours. I don't think I would be working otherwise.

An increase in confidence was a recurring feature in people's accounts. In some cases this was very much felt on a personal basis, as people discovered skills and talents and ways of being that they had not previously experienced or where the group setting encouraged people to develop a different side of themselves:

I'm a totally different person to what I was 20 years ago. ..I think I was just kept down a bit that's all

I think I'm more confident in a lot of things than I was before

It's developed my confidence – in me – my self esteem problems

I have never done a lot of stuff until I came here. I used to be quiet as anything and now I'm confident as anything

It's made me a strong person as well. Where I was quite a quiet shy person, it's actually made me stronger.

For others the change and increase in confidence was not just felt on a personal level but extended to incorporate a more collective reflection:

[Now] I think there is nothing older people cannot do that young people do, we do exactly the same as them, maybe slower and it might take a bit longer but we get there. ....



Following on from the profound impact people experienced in terms of their activity providing a much wanted focus and a sense of purpose, people also talked about the positive impact on general emotional well-being:

I've had some bad times and even just doing this has helped me get through, you know – its taken my mind off stuff when I've gone away – when I've been unhappy – when you go away on residential you forget about yourself – it takes you out of yourself because you've got to think about the group and what you are doing for them – sometimes it can just help you through life.

In addition to individual wellbeing, groups provided a reliable infrastructure for social support. This seemed to be particularly the case for older people after the loss of a partner or when children had moved away. Many references were being made to the group taking on the role of an extended family network that offered a wide range of support and far exceeded the original parameters and purpose of the group:

A fortnight ago I had my car stolen so I was without a car. You have no idea the members and people who had rung me and said how are you doing, do you want a lift, do you want your shopping in, how are you getting to the office – I have never been without a lift.

We look after each other. Everybody looks after each other – that's true. If you go somewhere and say oh so and so is missing – there is always somebody knows where they are. It's more or less care in the community. Because they do care about each other, they do really.

The impact that voluntary involvement brought with it was often extended to other family members and wider networks:

It has been really good for my daughter too. She has been coming along to the weekends and meetings and things. So she has been meeting lots of different people and is starting to see things from lots of different angles. And of course she has been learning all these new skills herself and has opportunities that she wouldn't have had.

It was striking how many people talked about the centrality of their voluntary involvement in their lives. Similar to the views that were expressed when people were reflecting on the anticipated benefits of community involvement, the need to have something that provided 'meaning' and 'purpose' became a central feature of the discussions:

Well I've gone from being someone who just went to work through the day and came home on a night and thought "well what will I do with myself" to actually have a sense of purpose on something else in my life.

It's having something to focus on you know

It's the belonging really ...it's a big thing even though its just two hours a week, I've just got to have something to focus on apart from work and the family and things like that.

People's reflections on the impact of their community involvement were closely related to the transformative aspects of social capital, as outlined in the review of the literature, in particular with reference to the "bridging" and "linking" properties. For example, people talked about changes in attitude and opinion towards other people, their perspective on community involvement and how their own values and tolerance had been affected:

At some time I would never have thought I would consider the community and now I do...

So many things have changed. My view to working – I really appreciate people doing voluntary work now, I'd never thought of people doing voluntary work and not getting paid for it. I had a good job and voluntary work, you know and I probably didn't give it a high status I think but now I think it is good that people are actually putting time in for a couple of hours and some people think you are actually getting paid for it....I definitely appreciate those people who put time in

Another thing I do as well – if I'm driving anywhere and I see a group of young people standing on the street I think what are they doing there and I'm always tempted to say what are you doing here – I think about that now and I think – where I live there are a lot of young people hang around on a night – near the chippie and that – so maybe one day I'll get round to actually doing that. I've got six months on maternity leave.

Some people displayed their emergent feelings of solidarity and their appreciation of others people's position as they talked about how their views on other people had changed, their involvement had made them more appreciative of other people's needs and had made them confront their own prejudices:

....it affects how I treat other people as well. ... I think about things a lot more than I used to...I think more about why people are like they are and I really like working it out and trying to help make people work through that.

I think the biggest development has been my own attitude and me as a person – I think about things a lot more and what we do and what makes people tick and how you can use that to develop somebody.

It made me think more about the way we talk about people, the way we put labels on them, I try not to do this any more

It gets you to meet people, people you would never meet before and some people have got amazing life experience and amazing personalities and they in turn affect you as well

Somebody might appear to be really badly behaved but then you start to learn a bit about people and you think I can see why they act like that. It's not just that they are a bad person but it's their experiences that have made them into the person that they are as well

It's just great to see young people, its great to be with them and listen to what they've got to say and again it changes your way of thinking. I get really annoyed when I hear people putting the young people in with the old and young people and I do know what they are like – you've got one or two bad young people who might hate us but they are not all like that, I know some great young people who go and change things.

Some people talked (with pride or astonishment) about how they felt their involvement in particular groups had made an impact on the way society sees people, how the rights and aspirations of whole groups have been changed through collective, community action:

There were all these important people, and they were all looking at me and listening to what I had to say

These shifts of understanding have a further, significant impact on what can broadly be termed “civic voluntarism” (Verba et al 1995). As a further extension of a “rational choice” model of civic participation, people are more likely to engage in political action if they believe their views and the views of people like them are going to have an impact (Pattie et al 2002). What could be observed in this context was that alongside people's incrementally increasing individual activism there was a growth in group confidence in the importance of their collective views, which in turn also increased their willingness to become active:

People say the youth assembly helped with this or this and a couple of big policies within the council have been affected by what we had to say as young people – sort of local agenda, 21, bus fares – it was just things that when you were a young person you think we've got no chance of

being able to affect this and now being able to make a difference –...I think that's the difference in the motivation to listen to young people.

It is here where the “linking” aspects, closely related to Bourdieu's (1983) perspective of social capital become most apparent as people talked about how they developed the contacts, capacity and the resources to move beyond previously perceived boundaries and exert influence in spheres outside their normal circles (Butcher et al 2007).

Many people talked about the way associational structures enhanced what could loosely be described as ‘social cohesion’; that is the way different groups within society or within a local community were encouraged to work together. In that way people created what Knowles (1950) would call “laboratories of democracy”, confirming that “people can only learn social and political responsibility by experiencing that responsibility, ...through associations, clubs and councils, and in the life of their neighbourhoods, churches and rural communities, by actively participating in associations, clubs and charitable societies” (Freire1974:36). Although this was not always considered to be a straightforward process, linking previously disparate groups or enhancing mutual understanding and increasing tolerance was seen to be a prominent benefit:

I did a lot of volunteer work in Northern Ireland and I got to meet both sides and I got on fantastic with them. The only time I didn't is when they had religious days and I had my religious days but I sort of pushed myself away from my religion – I stopped going to church, I stopped becoming a catholic and I joined up at a local Presbyterian church and become a Christian and that's when my life changed and that's when I decided Catholics are human beings, Protestants are human beings so where I am, I'm in the middle, I don't take sides so that's how I ... I just said enough is enough I don't want nothing to do with this, I don't want my religion brought into things – if I've got Protestant mates I want to keep my Protestant mates and if I have catholic mates I want to keep my catholic mates so I just started putting them together and we used to go out and have drinks ....I lived in Ballymena, a little village called Ballymena – the majority were Protestants I was the only catholic, born catholic in the housing estate and I got no trouble I got treated respectfully of the kids and the parents and everybody around me.

The impact that a 'social mix' can have on the formation of attitudes and the promotion of general trust is well documented as an outcome of adult learning (Schuller et al 2002). In a similar way respondents talked about how their work had increased the integration of marginalized groups or highlighted the benefits of reducing the segregation of people from different age groups:

There is always lots of different people coming to the community café, really all sorts. We welcome everybody, not only in the café, in the centre too. We have now also people coming who had disabilities, like learning disabilities. Some of them are now also involved in the camping group. They are the same as everybody else.

A lot of young people don't get involved with old people until they are older themselves and I think if the ages can mix there would be more tolerance from both sides because old people are intolerant of youngsters and if they could mix more because young people have got a lot to give old people and vice versa.

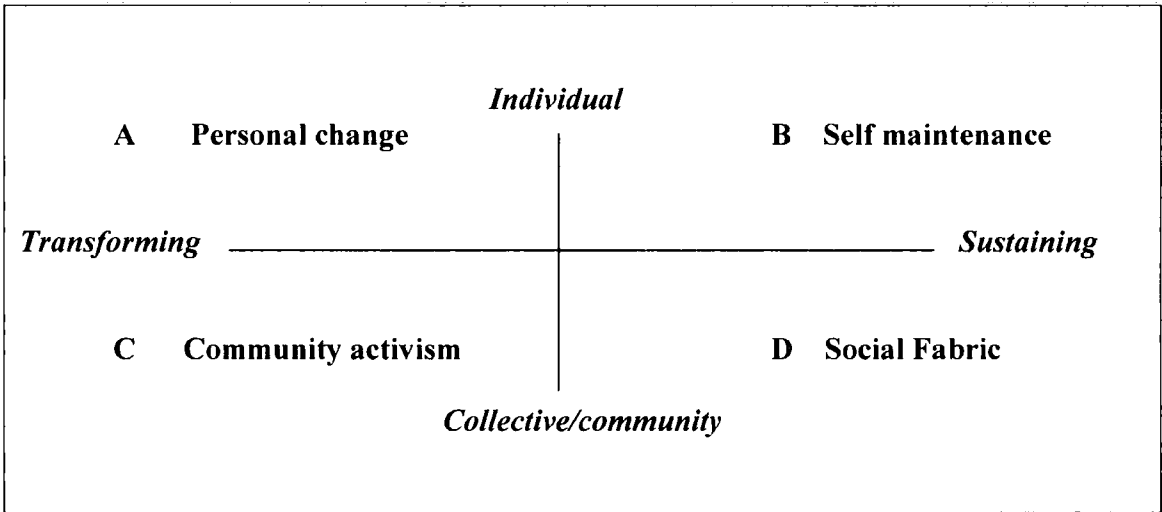
Another feature that emerged was that working with diverse groups did not only have an effect on individuals' perceptions and actions, but also found its way in a collective consciousness. What people therefore observed is what I would call changes in 'culture', which are changes in the individual and collective life-worlds, perceptions of what constitute entitlements, or a slight shift in norms, acceptable ways of relating to each other, changes in aspiration:

I think people's eating habits are changing. Many people are not used to sitting down for a meal any more. My mum was quite traditional; she used to cook a meal when we came home. But now here, a lot of people come to the centre, many from the same family and they have a meal here together and the young ones learn different ways of eating again

After all, "people live their lives in and through others, so that their understanding of themselves and others is inter-subjective; people share interpretations of their world. They communicate with one another. What they understand of it, what they can

communicate about, is rooted in tacit agreements with others about how that world is constituted and how it functions” (Williamson 1998:23).

What emerges from the above is that, in addition to individual and collective impact, similar to the effects of learning (Schuller et al 2002), community activism can have a transforming and sustaining role; both on an individual and collective level:



**Figure 3** Transforming and sustaining community activity (Schuller et al 2002:12)

Schuller et al draw attention to the fact that in general the transforming ends of the spectrum, both individually and collectively, are more frequently and more easily documented. The sustaining aspects tend to have more of a hypothetical character, as they may refer more to what may be avoided rather than created. However, in this context, there were indeed many references to the maintenance of emotional wellbeing on an individual level and the ‘social’ fabric on the community level.

Preston and Feinstein (2004) highlight how adult learning can change attitudes, in particular in terms of developing a more 'open minded' approach to issues such as race and authority. Although adult learning is not associated with shifting ideological positions it does seem to prevent individuals from moving to a more entrenched racist-authoritarian position. In this way the change in attitude may not have transforming potential but can indirectly make a contribution to maintaining the social fabric of communities. A number of respondents made reference to how they viewed other people differently, how they had become more aware of the unhelpfulness of attaching labels to groups of people and how they had become more aware of others' needs.

Putnam (2000) suggests that civic engagement builds localised trust and tolerance which then transcends to more generalised trust and tolerance. Green et al (2003) however claim that social capital and social cohesion are essentially different phenomena and that there is little evidence that an increase in social capital automatically leads to a higher degree of social cohesion on a macro level and that most research will explore the relationship on a community level, as indeed does this research. Green et al (2003) also point out that Putnam himself makes the difference between associational structures that encourage bridging between groups and individuals, rather than just bonding within the group<sup>36</sup>, and highlights the disputed relationship between trust and social capital. This study provided references to both kinds of bonds. One example here would be a group of older people who formed an older persons' organisation and who very effectively organised activities for themselves, displayed a high degree of internal trust, reflected

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<sup>36</sup> Also see Granovetter's (1973) reference to 'weak ties' and 'strong ties'

coherently on the collective needs of older people but displayed an inward looking approach, seemed quite unaffected by the wider network they worked within and talked in a derogatory way about young people. This example can be contrasted with others, such as one respondent who consistently displayed a very utilitarian approach to community activism, showed no signs of any form of 'collective consciousness' , but talked with pride about the inclusive nature of her community centre. Similarly, there were other references to an increase in understanding of the needs of other groups, particularly those who were sharing physical spaces. It would be interesting to explore this in more detail and investigate how these declared shifts in attitude come about and what factors had been at play to encourage this form of 'bonding amongst groups', such as tolerance arising from mixed social networks (Preston and Feinstein 2004).



## **Chapter 5      Movements and Dynamics**

This chapter synthesises the findings presented in chapters 3 and 4, as the motivational disposition of individuals seemed to interact in particular ways with the range and kind of support that was available to them. Firstly, I will outline the different kinds of community activities the participants of this study were involved in and how these are affected by their motivational disposition. Secondly, this chapter will explore the dynamics of community involvement and focus on the way people's activities changed and developed through the processes that they were involved in.

### ***Arena of Community Activity***

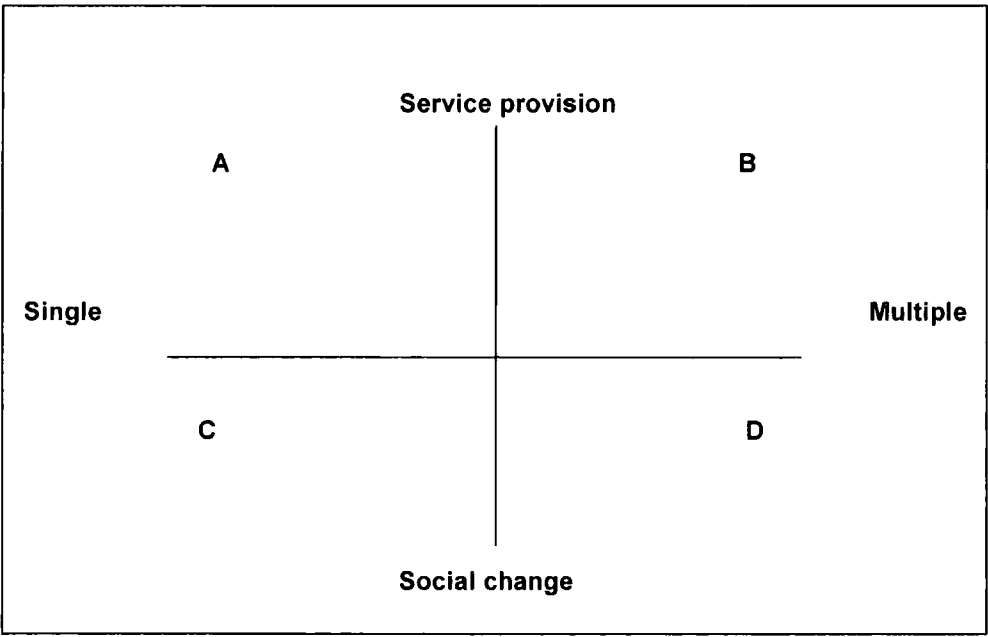
Looking at the sample collectively in terms of what kinds of groups and issues the respondents were involved in revealed a complex pattern. The way people talked about the impact their involvement has had and the resources, in the broadest sense, that were available to them, seemed to be in a particular relationship to the nature and extent of their activity.

Firstly, some participants were involved in a singular activity, others talked about a range of community activities that they were currently involved in and others also made reference to a series of past involvements.

Secondly, the nature of the activities can be initially categorized in terms of their function and purpose and broadly fall into two main categories;

1. activities that were designed to provide services within local communities and self help / interest groups, such as local history group an activity group for older people, a local walking group, a community café, music group.
2. activities, including campaign groups, that expressively or implicitly had a political objective and can broadly be categorized as aiming to effect social change, such as a campaign group to raise awareness about date rape, a minority ethnic support group, a refugee and asylum seekers support group.

The positioning of interview respondents in terms of frequency of involvement and nature of their activities can be illustrated in the following way:



**Figure 4      Arena of community activity**

Looking at the sample, at the time of interview, the respondents who had reacted to a particular issue that affected their lives or had a particular personal interest would be located in quadrant A. They provided services for others and / or were involved in activities that they benefited from themselves. Their main pathways were through a life changing event or crisis, some people also drew on ethical considerations, and the main benefits referred to were personal.

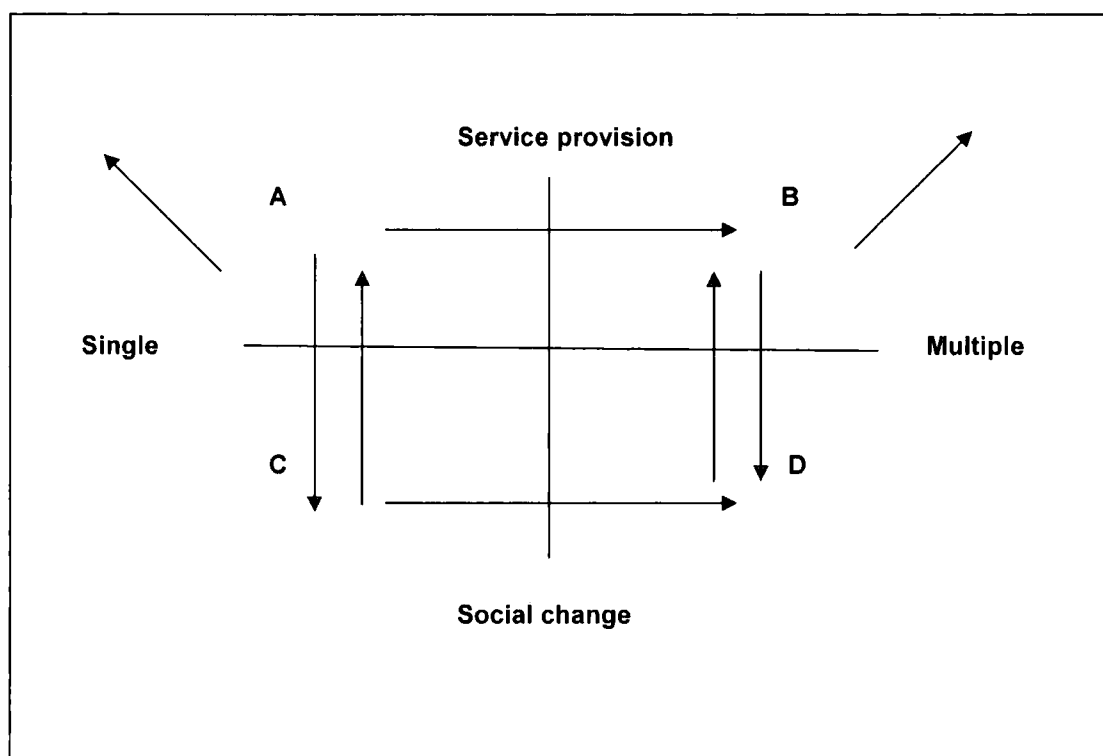
In quadrant B were typically those people who were in a volunteering role, the 'helpers', who saw their main motivation as being able to make a difference to others. Some of them had become involved in volunteering through a life event such as needing to replace structures that were lost through ending other roles, such as a bereavement, children growing up and retirement. They talked about there being a culture of involvement in their lives, either running through their families or being conditioned into caring roles. Some people added a theoretical perspective as they drew on their ethical beliefs to explain their sustained involvement.

In Quadrant C were 'single issue' activists, i.e. they were currently involved in a group because they felt strongly about one particular issue. In the sample the main pathway was via another group that they were already involved in and reference was made to ethical or political considerations.

In Quadrant D were serial, committed community activists, usually with an extended portfolio of involvements. Their involvement was typically long term and covered a range of different issues. They used political, ethical and spiritual underpinnings to explain their activities. Others referred to a culture of involvement primarily through religion and early exposure to political issues through their involvement in other (sometimes political) groups. Others started their work as 'single issue activists' (see quadrant C) and gradually increased their involvement as they became more aware of how issues related and interacted with each other.

### ***'Movements'***

One of the common and recurring strands of the interviews was the way people reflected on the particular dynamics of their involvement, i.e their position as captured in the quadrants above was not fixed and. people changed their path and nature of involvement as a result of and through their engagement. Many respondents talked, often in very animated ways, about their 'journeys' that had taken them to sometimes unexpected destinations. Revisiting figure 4 above, the patterns of movements can be illustrated as follows:



**Figure 5 Movement in Arena of community activity**

The main directions can be described as follows:

### **Movement ‘out’**

One option of change and movement, the most radical perhaps, is related to people opting out, i.e. ceasing their involvement altogether. This may well be the case for people in any of the quadrants, but because of the selection criteria for the sample for this study it would have been unlikely that these people would have been included. There was one respondent however (in quadrant A) whose circumstances were changing and she was indicating that this would also automatically lead to her not “needing” to continue her involvement. Another respondent (in quadrant B) who had sought voluntary work and had tried more than one activity, was starting to reflect on whether her input was meeting

her needs and also indicated that her work was turning out not to be as rewarding as she had anticipated and was therefore re-considering her commitment:

....there are some who are ungrateful and moan because I am five minutes late or because I don't take them home first which is an impossibility when you've got 15 other people on the bus but in the main they are generally very grateful and happy that they being picked up. So I get that out of it, they buy me sweets occasionally, ginger snaps and you know...

Equally, there is the possibility that those who are pursuing a particular concern (quadrant C) may cease their involvement once the aims of the campaign are met. Exploring the circumstances of people who decide to opt out of any of the quadrants would be beyond the scope of this study and not feasible with the current sample, but worthy of separate investigation.

### **Movement within the model**

Broadly speaking, movements along the axes of the model are characterized by a change in volume of the activity (horizontal) and the nature of the activity (vertical).

Movement along the **horizontal** axis demonstrates a change in the behaviour of the respondents, and movement from quadrant A to B illustrates the existence or development of the associational structures that provide an environment where people feel encouraged to take on greater degrees of responsibility and develop new interests. Respondents, especially those who were attached to an organisation of a broader nature, such as a community centre, talked about becoming aware of other activities and groups and being encouraged to widen their involvement. People could chart their movement from group to group and women in particular were asked to "help out" and gradually took more responsible roles. These roles were often also related to the general arena of

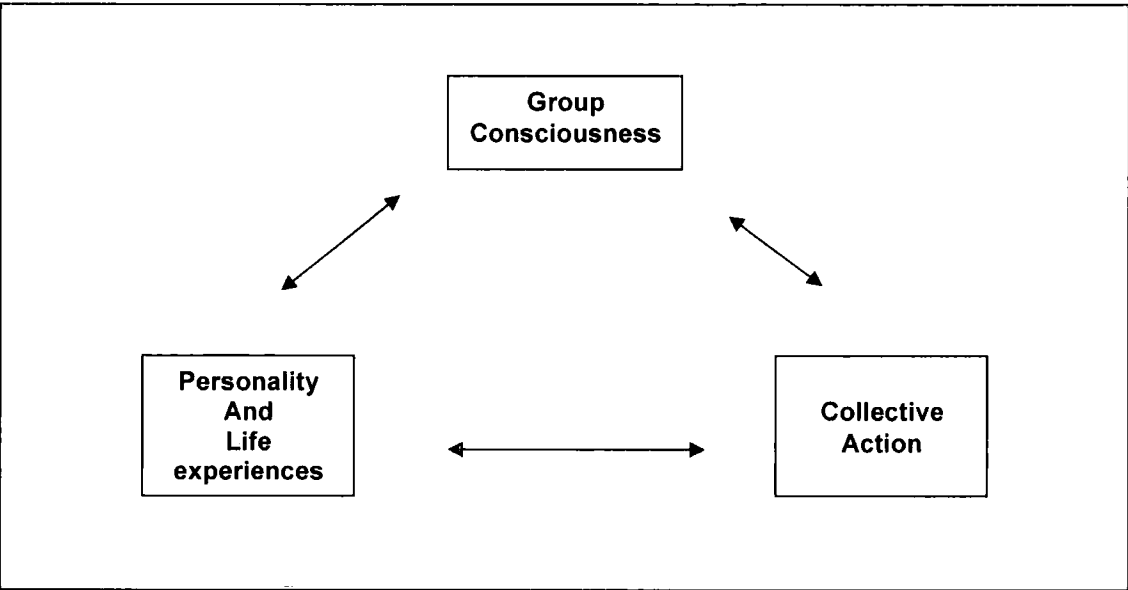
'governance', such as people representing their groups or becoming officers of community associations. Again, one of the prominent features here was the importance of personal encouragement and the mobilization that came from other people, at this stage generally professionals in the field. People talked about being "roped in" and "dragged along", often indicating that their development had felt out of their reach or was out of character for them.

People who moved from quadrant C to quadrant D talked about their growing awareness of how issues related to each other, and also how involvements in one group led to involvements in others, as the following example illustrates:

Well I was very un-political when I was younger. It really started for me when I started getting interested in environmental politics when I was 18 or 19 and when I moved to the North East. ....so I found out about Friends of the Earth ... I wanted to do something for the environment and I felt quite strongly about it .... probably through reading a lot about the natural world and becoming aware that there were things happening. I had this slow dawning political awareness surrounded by environmental issues - not around politics to do with human societies so much - except in the way that we interact with the environment. So that was my initial interest but through that I started to realise what the human social connections were because I eventually worked on a project in Durham when I moved to Durham three years after moving to Newcastle - I was running an insulation project to insulate people's houses cheaply so that they would save money on heating and there would be less energy wasted and so that was when I started to realise more that there is a social community connection with these things. While I was living in Durham at that time although I was being paid to work for Friends of the Earth, it wasn't a voluntary job, I still continued to be a volunteer campaigner in my own time on environmental matters but I also got involved with a town/gown community organisation called Folkus which ran projects to help various disadvantaged people, and me and a friend used to run the furniture recycling project so that was really my first introduction to community work of that sort by getting involved directly in helping people, though not in a particular structure. I eventually sat on the committee of Folkus as a representative of that particular project - that's when I saw how these things work - how they are managed, how they are organised so that was my first introduction to that - I was in my early 20s

Movement down the **vertical axis**, is largely characteristic of a change of attitude of the respondents and related to a process of politicisation at the heart of which appeared to be a growing group consciousness. However, Lauren Duncan (1999) argues that group consciousness, albeit a powerful psychological motivator, does not automatically lead to

collective action, but is mediated through a number of intrapersonal variables, notably personality and life experiences.



**Figure 6    Mediation Model of Group Consciousness (Duncan 1999)**

Therefore, looking again at the respondents who were currently located in quadrants C and D (i.e those who were involved in issues related to attempting to effect social change) it is interesting to try and identify how they reflected on their life experiences and their growing group consciousness. It seemed that in an extension of Duncan’s model the impact of life experiences need to be differentiated as:

- a. Experiences in the past and how they are viewed to have shaped people’s attitudes
- b. New life experiences that have arisen through their community activism and have shaped and altered their views.

In terms of past experiences, some respondents talked about their experience of disadvantage, of being bullied at school, of having experienced racism and how that had affected their determination to “do something about it” and to make sure that other people



did not have to suffer the same fate. People reflected on these life experiences and how these had shaped their perceptions and their willingness to take an active role. This could take the form of a very individual experience that triggered a broader understanding of the needs of other people:

...I was bullied quite a lot and I think it got to about year 10 and I thought I want to make a difference to other young people at school about knowing what's there and having some sort of a service that young people would feel they could come to if they had a problem

or a more general reflection on issues of disadvantage and the opportunity to re-dress this on a wider basis:

...just touching on my own background I was actually fostered all my life so my parents were quite poor so I never got... my holiday was at Whitley Bay, that's the farthest I ever got. I did a couple of little bits at youth clubs but I never really stuck at anything. Looking now I think – if I'd had these opportunities when I was young enough to really make something of – like I say a lot of the young people now – my life would have taken a completely different direction and I might have got involved at a lot earlier age.

That does really affect how you look – I'm giving these people an opportunity, I'm helping these people have the ability I never knew about, let alone got involved with so I think my own personal experience .... I think that's been a gradual build up.

The exposure to oppression on a greater scale and the resulting lifelong commitment to community activism based on a political analysis of current issues formed the basis for another respondent, who now in his mid eighties traced his formative experiences back to being a young person in India before independence:

I took part in my youth days in a movement which was called 'British out of India'. Because the group was to get rid of the British in India because some people ... were very good but others were arrogant and therefore they made you feel that you were a slave ... a group was formed to protest and they were you know; inspired by people like Ghandi, like Nehru. There were so many people who were inspiring people to do something for the future of the country and I was really very much involved.

Similarly, reflections on personal life experiences and the resulting views were acute and immediate. In response to the question about how his views on 'community mindedness' were formed, one young man who grew up in Northern Ireland answered easily and emphatically:

.... living there and growing up and seeing the divide in the country ...that's where it comes from because I've grown up with it, I've grown up with people hating people ...

In terms of new experiences, or experiences brought about through their involvement, people drew attention to a range of, sometimes subtle and incremental, changes as, for example, one woman in her 60s observed:

..even if you don't want to think that way, you do start thinking that women have always been disadvantaged and I find a lot more leaning towards this kind of thing...

The educative potential of voluntary groups in terms of developing agency has been well documented by Elsdon et al (1995) and was reflected in the way some of the respondents charted their own developments. One aspect was that people developed more confidence in the importance of their own life experiences and their value in understanding issues on a more global scale. One respondent for example, as a result of being a member of the food co-operative, had developed an awareness of consumer rights and food additives in relation to childhood illness. She attended a number of events relating to these issues and then took part in an international conference representing the voice of low income food consumers. She talked about how she developed the confidence to stand up and speak in front of professionals ('important people') and remembered her initial surprise that her views were taken notice of. She now feels very strongly that her opinions count and that she, and others like her, can have an impact on a greater scale. In a similar vein, some of the young people talked about how their activism had increased both their understanding of young people's rights and their belief in their ability to effect change.

A further aspect of change in perspective related to the way confidence in the value of collective approaches developed. Allman and Wallis suggest that adult educators could

face the post modern challenge by reclaiming some of the original theoretical sources that inform a radical praxis of education and politics and by “initiating educational and political projects in which participants can experience, even if only briefly, the meaning of a socialist/radical tradition” (1995:32). Sentiments of the latter were reflected in some of the respondents’ views who said that “seeing things work and seeing how things can work in a collective way” had been a significant impetus and motivator to act on their beliefs. Similarly, one of the young respondents reflected on how as a member of the youth assembly he witnessed how “a couple of the big policies within the council had been affected by what [they] had to say as young people”.

### **Reflexive movements**

A second strand of movement along the vertical axis is concerned with how group consciousness and a political analysis can affect the way services are delivered within local communities and how motivational dispositions therefore interact with the processes that people are involved in as part of their activism. Looking again at the respondents who were located in quadrants A and B it appeared that the kinds of services that were being offered and the kinds of people who were involved in them fell into different categories:

1. those people whose involvement started with a ‘life event’ or explained their community involvement through drawing on their ethical beliefs that related to ‘helping others’ tended to be involved in activities that had a ‘classic’ volunteering dimension, i.e. their activity benefited others. Although the “need to be needed” was cited, rather than claims to altruistic tendencies, the activity itself

did not display aspects of mutuality. People in this category tended to increase their involvement by taking on extra volunteering roles or extended their involvement by taking on additional roles, such as becoming involved in the governance of organisations. A typical example here would be E.

*E... had become involved in volunteering on her retirement. She very much felt the need to remain active and was very keen to find something 'to fill [her] life'. She talked about not being particularly selective about what she was looking for. While attending a club at a community centre she became aware of another group's need for a volunteer driver and offered her services. She also became a volunteer mentor for young people leaving care after seeing an advert on TV.*

*She talked about 'nobody being insular' and that she had been 'brought up as someone who helped' and that being part of a big family made her more appreciative of other people's needs. On reflection she did not feel that her activities had had a great impact on her 'other than that it's filling a void'. She had attended a number of short courses covering some of the practical aspects of her volunteering activity. She was still involved in mentoring but had given up driving, because it she felt unsupported in her activity by the organisation she was working for and she had become worried about being liable for anything that happened to the people in her care.*

2. People who became involved through a life crisis or a particular personal need and who did not offer any theoretical underpinnings tended to be involved in interest groups or activities that they were the beneficiary of. From this group of participants there was no development and people stayed within their established groups – often for some considerable time. In some cases additional roles were taken within the group, and in others people ceased their involvement when their circumstances changed or their needs were met and they 'moved out' of the arena altogether.

*G had attended an outdoor activity group for older people that was organised by a local organisation after his wife died and then became*

*involved in setting up an activity group for older people himself. He had always been interested in walking and was unable to do much of it because of his wife's health.*

*G very much appreciates the group as giving him an alternative social outlet as he is 'not a boozier'. He also feels that he otherwise has few opportunities to get out of the house and would just be called upon to look after the grandchildren and his life would just be 'ebbing away'. As an older person G thinks that it would not be safe to undertake some of the activities by himself and being a member of a group therefore has practical benefits. He appreciated the support that his 'host' community centre is offering in terms of networking and having access to outdoor equipment that is available from another organisation. Since getting involved in the group G has attended a number of courses to increase the range of activities that the group can now offer and he has also set up another walking group in a different community centre. He does a lot of the administration for the group and has done a computer course that was offered at the centre, but otherwise group members are learning from each other and are using existing skills.*

3. People whose involvement was based on ethical beliefs relating to mutuality and socially binding contracts or drew on political perspectives showed the most varied patterns of involvement. They typically were involved in community based activities of more than one kind, moving between service provision and activities of a more explicitly political nature. Often their political analysis in turn led to more, and differently informed, service provision, as they for instance campaigned for services to be brought into local neighbourhoods or they set up services in response to the identified needs of disadvantaged groups. Although people were often beneficiaries of the groups they were a member of, their involvements differed from those described in 2 above. Part of what people described as "enlightened self interest" referred to seeing themselves as being part of a wider community. This seemed to allow them to "stand both inside and outside the situation" (Smith 1994:16). As a result, references to solidarity and

group consciousness were prominent features in these accounts. People talked about “being in the same boat” and the group being like a family where “people looked out for one another”. In terms of ‘movement’, additional activities often arose out of identified needs within the community, as the following examples illustrate:

*M. originally became involved by starting a local camping group, taking groups from poorer families camping, has raised money to buy camping equipment and has started a tradition of people going camping so that people can have a holiday who would not normally be able to have one. She also sees the educational potential of this activity in terms of the range of different skills that people learn from a camping experience and the challenge this can pose to previously held beliefs. She gets a ‘real buzz seeing people doing something that they haven’t done before’ and ‘introducing people to something new’. She ‘loves to make something happen’. M is also involved on the management committee of her local community centre, a leading member of the local food co-operative and sees the political dimension of low income families and food, and campaigns on issues of food additives, childhood nutrition and healthy eating. M talked about her awareness on these issues has developed as a result of her involvement in the community centre and how she has become increasingly more confident in her abilities to effect change. She has undertaken a range of short courses specifically related to these issues she is involved with and has also through informal, local learning opportunities, had the opportunity to improve her literacy skills which is an area she had felt uncomfortable about before. She us now also runs child safety courses, has become a playgroup leader and teaches gymnastics.*

*S has described her motivation to be a community activist as being largely determined by her upbringing and religious beliefs. These are compounded by her own experience of disadvantage and discrimination, both in terms of race and gender, coupled with her political analysis of these experiences. She describes how the initiatives that she participates in have evolved and developed:*

*“I have been involved with these kids at the visible ethnic minority support group and we used to do the asylum seekers drop in sessions.... In the drop in people are coming in with different problems, language problems, housing, health, doctors, immigration, you name it so we thought that rather than we help them like that we should give them some sort of an incentive so that they can learn their language and they can help*

*themselves and they can be self sufficient and we were noticing that there were lots of health problems again language was the barrier throughout so we decided we will do something on those lines. We also arrange two main festivals a year. One we call it a mini mela – the word meaning is togetherness, meeting together and mini means on a small scale and the big melas that happen in Newcastle I have noticed there is not much for the children and it is a family thing but the children are left in the corner but we decided we would do it as a family and we will work as a family and we are doing this and it has been very successful for the last four years. I used to do voluntary work with the asylum seekers and refugee group and out of which we have formed a family learning group because we found there was a need for parents as their mums cannot speak any English and for the toddlers that they should be coming into a family learning group so that they can learn as well as the children. Then we thought there was a need for their emotional well being... as well healthy lifestyles giving them tips on health so we split the group into two days and on a Wednesday we do a yoga class and we do some relaxation sessions with them and on a Thursday we have a full two hour session on family learning, learning as a family."*

As can be seen from the above examples those whose motivation was supported by a theoretical analysis took on different roles from those whose motivation was primarily functional, i.e. quadrants A and B were 'inhabited' by different kinds of activists:

- The example under category 1 above indicates that people can be involved in the provision of services; they will make a contribution but will not necessarily be involved in shaping the provision – a 'typical' volunteer role.
- In category 2 are people who will have a personal investment in the groups that they are involved in and they will expend energy to ensure the smooth running and preservation of the group, and thus take on a maintenance role.
- In category 3 are those people whose activism is supported by theoretical underpinnings and who are most likely to take on developmental roles within the groups that they are involved in and consequently provide services of a different

kind. The provision typically remains flexible and responsive to community need and generates new and extended provision.

Of course groups can have different members who take on different roles and there is the potential of conflict arising from these, as the need for development with some may not correspond with the desire for maintenance for others. There was some indication from one of the respondents that this kind of conflict led to him leaving a group, precisely because the dominant forces within the group were blocking its potential development. It would therefore be interesting to pursue in a separate study how different motivational dispositions interact within groups.



## **Chapter 6      Summary and Conclusion**

This thesis aimed to explore the motivational disposition of people involved in collective community activism and the circumstances that foster their engagement. The main outcomes relating to the principal research questions can be summarised as follows.

Despite what has been said about individualised preoccupations people continue to have a plethora of reasons to seek collective solutions. It has also been shown that people can arrive at this point from a very wide range of starting points and explain their motivation in significantly different ways. The range of explanations given, the diversity of motivational dispositions, as well as the concepts that people have drawn on seem to challenge the 'post modern condition' as characterised by a predominantly individual mindset. People's personal needs, their ethics, their political and religious beliefs appeared to create an effective antidote. However, it is the interplay of motivational contributors that is of particular interest to this research. Motivational dispositions can be divided into those people who displayed what can be described as either a simple pattern or a complex motivational position:

- For people with a simple pattern their involvement was based on particular individual needs or interests and also included those who expressed an interest to help others.
- People with a complex motivational position talked about the interrelated nature of their involvement; in addition to personal benefits they reflected on pathways

and general theoretical underpinnings that informed their decision to become involved in community activism.

The conditions that people considered to be helpful and utilised for supporting their community activism varied significantly and displayed a range of different features. What became apparent is that the way people make sense of their collective aspirations and how they will and can act on them depends on the environment that is available to them and will essentially determine the nature of the resulting activity. It appears that people's motivational dispositions provide the basic 'ingredients' that can be activated, maintained and developed through a supportive infrastructure. The nature and sustainability of the resulting community activity is largely dependent on this infrastructure and the investment that is made in its support. The simplicity or complexity of people's motivational disposition is reflected in the level of complexity of the resulting community activity. The latter can then also be described as simple or complex:

- Simple, in this context, covers interest groups, activities mainly for the benefit of their participants or activities that included one-dimensional volunteering relationships
- Complex initiatives are multi-dimensional, developmental activities, displaying aspects of mutuality and 'embeddedness' within local communities that are responsive to identified needs and have transformative capacities.

The way community activity appeared to be determined by people’s motivational dispositions and their interaction with the conditions and contexts they find themselves in can be illustrated as follows:

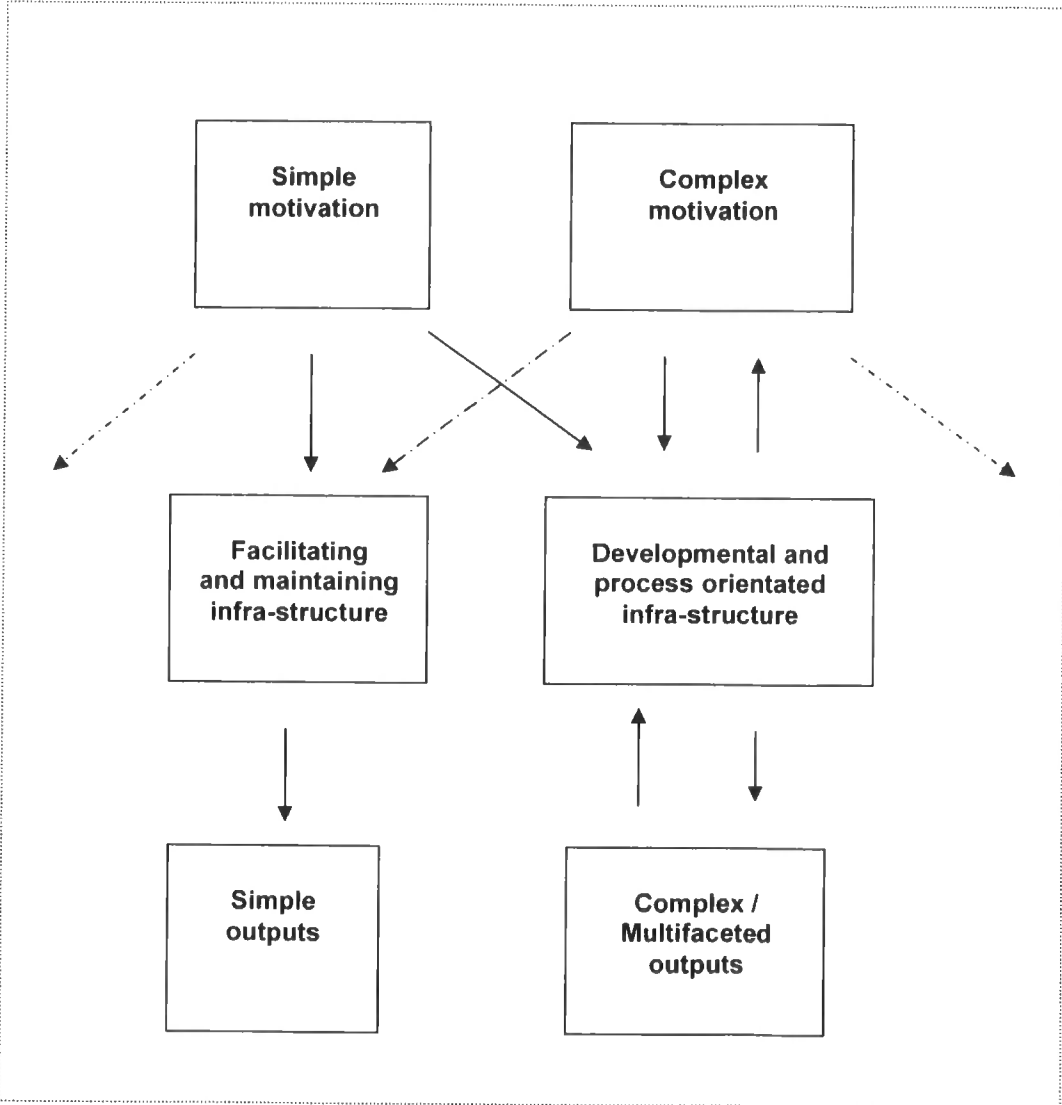


Figure 7 Determination of Community Activity

The outcomes of this study seem to confirm Beierlein and Preiser's findings<sup>37</sup> that long term engagement is often more linked to a fundamental value base rather than based on instrumental reasons (2004:216) and it is important to revisit how people's theoretical underpinnings and their resulting value base was actually arrived at. Here there appeared to be two main strands. Firstly, as shown in Chapter 3, some people talked about their values being shaped by their up-bringing or their religious beliefs. Women in particular mentioned being conditioned into caring roles that either made them look for other outlets once their family responsibilities had ceased or sought involvements that were essentially determined by their 'helping' role. Others again were guided by ethical convictions that were seeking an antidote to the perceived fragmentation of social environments around them and referred to the benefits of socially binding contracts based on reciprocity and mutuality. It may be useful in this context to consider the possibility of a 'cohort effect' within particular sections of the sample for this study. Age, for example, is second only to education as a predictor of virtually all forms of civic engagement (Putnam 2000:247), but the crucial issue here might not be the age of the respondents but **when** these people were young and therefore what the predominant values and outlooks were at that time. There was some indication that the younger respondents' views and beliefs could be mirroring some of the older participants' views, but were displaying "new forms of solidarity" (Zoll 1988) through creating their own definitions and allegiances (Salling Olesen 1999). Because of the small size of the sample this comparison could not be reliably made in this study but would be interesting to explore separately.

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<sup>37</sup> In their study on trade union engagement

Secondly, there were others who talked about their activism being brought about incrementally as a result of their community involvement. As outlined in Chapters 4 and 5 this could lead to a change in behaviour as well as a change in attitude, i.e. they may have increased their involvement or changed its nature. In the latter, it appeared that people's value base had been changed and with that their motivation and sustainability of their involvement. It is precisely this process that I refer to as the infrastructure that has the capacity to effect either simple or complex outcomes and it is for this reason that the infrastructure warrants closer inspection.

What became clear from the reflections of all participants is that community involvement of all kinds needs to be nurtured and supported in order to develop,<sup>38</sup> and that respondents had drawn on a very wide range of sources for help and support (see Chapter 4). The kind and nature of the support existed within a particular relationship to both the motivational disposition of the participants and the nature of the outcomes. As suggested in figure 7 above, the supportive infrastructure can broadly be divided into two categories: a maintaining infrastructure and a developmental infrastructure.

A maintaining infrastructure provided a wide range of practical support and resources: people here talked about needing access to office space, photocopying, stationery or in some cases the availability of specialist equipment to support particular activities. Some people also referred to the availability of training opportunities, primarily related to the

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<sup>38</sup> As a community worker I am aware of people being active in local communities without any or only minimal support and a comparison of how different environments affect outcomes is worthy of a separate enquiry.

nature of the activity they were involved or skills that related to learning to be able to run their own affairs more effectively.

A developmental infrastructure offered all the aspects of a maintaining infrastructure but showed additional features such as people having access to sustained coaching and mentoring, being involved in group processes that allowed them to further explore their values and beliefs whilst building alliances and developing their consciousness. Access to training went beyond the acquisition of skills and also included confidence building and opportunities for critical reflection on power and inequality issues. Moreover, people's learning here was complemented by tangible opportunities to influence, shape and construct alternatives within their communities and beyond.

In light of these definitions and the central function of different kinds of infrastructure a number of further points emerge. Figure 7 above suggests particular pathways:

Those people with a simple motivational starting point will need to have access to a range of resources that will allow them to maintain an involvement that is simple in nature. The involvements make a positive contribution as they tend to provide services, opportunities for volunteering and maintain an associational life that, as outlined in Chapter 4, can have a sustaining and nurturing function. However, people's involvement may be short-lived and their contribution to the formation of social capital is limited – as they are not designed to provide the obligations and expectations coupled with the requisite “linking” properties (Coleman 1988) or the respective trust, norms and networks (Putnam 1993).

People with a simple motivational starting position but with access to a developmental infrastructure can, like those people with a complex starting point, become involved in complex outcomes, i.e. committed, long term activism. Examining these processes in more depth is of particular interest but also poses a particular set of challenges. People who drew on their political convictions for example were not passive recipients to the infrastructure that was available to them but took on active roles in shaping it and made demands for structural change. The reflexive relationship between participants and infrastructure was a prominent feature, i.e. not only were the participants developed and supported through the infrastructure and support mechanisms available to them, they themselves became part of the infrastructure and added a wide range of dimensions to it. Participants here took on a range of multiple roles as they not only took more responsibilities for running their own affairs, but became mentors, supporters, role models and initiators of new activities and initiatives. Similarly, the exposure to a developmental infrastructure affected people's motivational stance and increased its complexity. It is at this point that the pivotal position of the infrastructure becomes most apparent. Revisiting the main theoretical debates, as outlined in the review of the literature, it is the infrastructure that has the capacity to turn individual concerns into shared endeavours with a focus on the "norms and networks that allow people to act collectively", that is "the sources as opposed to the consequences of social capital" (Woodcock and Narayan 2000:3).

Figure 7 above also suggests that it is possible that people with a complex motivational disposition will either not be able to act on it either because there is no infrastructure

available, or the limitations of a 'maintenance' only infrastructure will curtail their potential. The selection criteria for the sample of this study did not allow me to explore this dimension, but a separate study could try and contrast the development of similarly minded activists who operate within different support structures.

What are the key features of a developmental infrastructure? As outlined above, a 'maintaining' infrastructure is largely related to the resources that are made available. A developmental infrastructure is characterized by the addition of 'opportunities' and 'relationships'. 'Opportunities' are largely the availability of a range of associations and groups that allow people to move and develop within, especially those whose structures display collective and cooperative ways of working. Participants in this study referred to the way they moved between groups, taking on more active and ambitious roles and how their beliefs and trust were shaped by working alongside groups that they would not normally encounter. Community centres in particular offered "laboratories of democracy" "where people learned to work co-operatively" (Knowles 1950:9). In this study, for example, this included intergenerational work, work with refugees and asylum seekers and people with disabilities. The shared social space, coupled with opportunities for joint work generated signs of "bridging" social capital as opposed to the "bonding" social capital (Putnam 2000) that could be observed with groups that were operating in isolation from others. As a result, a developmental infrastructure made a contribution to the formation of social capital in a number of different ways: people were extending their links and bonds to other groups within their local community and developing



relationships based on solidarity and an appreciation of shared concerns, whilst also developing skills and an awareness that fostered the development of external links.

'Relationships' refers to one of the findings of this study, i.e. the importance that key individuals played in mobilising others. This was observed at different points in the study. At the initial stages it appeared that the encouragement to get involved came from a very wide range of individuals who could come from a wider range of professional groups but also consisted of friends and family members. When people talked about the help and support they were drawing on to further their involvements, it became clear that people were now more relying on a more distinct set of professional skills that became part of a shared resource and concentrated on fostering group work, assisting with project development, training and confidence building. The latter in particular was based on long term, established relationships that provided on-going low level support that had long term effects, rather than short-term, pre-determined outcomes.

As Shaw and Martin (2000) argue there are a number of different discourses around notions of citizenship that work on different definitions of democracy and with that suggest different priorities and strategies. As outlined above, if there are a wide range of motivational dispositions that allow for the engagement for the common good, but how this potential engagement will ultimately develop depends on the nature of interventions and levels of support. This in turn will shape the roles of professionals, in particular community workers. A neo-liberal discourse of democracy and citizenship will on the one hand promote what Habermas (1988) calls "civil privatism" i.e. encourage people to

pursue their own interests without expecting too much accountability of the state, but will on the other hand make greater demands as 'customers' of services. This form of dependency culture however is precisely what current policy directives are trying to dismantle by shifting the emphasis to the promotion of greater self help. As "community work has consistently been employed to mediate the shifting relationship between the state and civil society" (Shaw and Martin 2000:408) the current emphasis is on strengthening the self help sector and administering very focused interventions on what are labelled marginalised groups.

This however displays a particular paradox. If 'third way thinking' aims to provide an alternative and antidote to social fragmentation and social exclusion and seeks to re-address concepts of a civil society, then the policy interest needs to be wider than the simple outputs described above and focus more on the complex outputs, with their corresponding features of mutuality and embeddedness within local communities, as "doing good for other people, however laudable, is not part of the definition of social capital" (Putnam 2000:117). This for example raises questions about the effectiveness of the current government drive to promote volunteering. Volunteering can be a very effective contribution to the provision of welfare and services, it is comparatively simple to maintain, but remains in itself a simple, one-dimensional output. It can become a complex output through a different investment in the infra-structure which then, as shown in figure 7 above, can develop its own momentum of both involving people with different motivational stances and fostering collective approaches. However, the processes associated with a complex infrastructure, as shown in chapters 4 and 5, also carry an

element of risk as their outputs are neither immediately measurable or ultimately controllable. The nature of the infrastructure that becomes available to local communities reveals the essential tension between controlling versus facilitating the development of social capital (Henderson 2007). This echoes the concerns that were raised by Frank Coffield (1999) with regard to the coercive aspects of policy initiatives and their potential for social control. It is here where the shortcomings of an emphasis on “reinvigorating” social capital (Putnam 2000) or imposing solutions for the decline in social capital become most apparent, as Crothers argues that “leaders who act in diverse communities to regenerate and reinvigorate social capital must be sensitive to the values, goals and ideals of local populations if they are to act legitimately and serve as models of the kind of democratic action idealised in the concept of social capital” (2002:219).

The potential of complex outcomes therefore could lie at the heart of regeneration in the widest possible as they support transformative approaches, based on a shared perspective of identified local issues. The benefits arising from the involvement of committed activists, as shown above, are that they are likely not just to participate and react, but also to initiate and create. Their engagement can go beyond immediate individual need and is likely to build capacity, provide continuity and ‘re-generate’ activism as they re-enforce social norms such as mutuality and reciprocity, which can be regarded as the corner stones of any definition of social capital. Moreover, as the data clearly indicates, the opportunities for developing the “linking” aspects of social capital can extend the power and influence of local people into spheres that they might not have been able to access, thus creating a firm foundation for participation and engagement. It has also been shown

that this process of “linking” social capital, when coupled with a complex infra-structure was not just concentrating on extending contacts, but people started to question their own position within society and began to make links between their own experience and others in a similar position. People here not only acted collectively to further their own groups’ needs they also developed a critical consciousness that invited them to reflect on their own and others’ position within society.

However, it is at this point where current policy foci seem to work in diametrically opposed directions: the dominant approach to addressing social problems tends to highlight perceived deficiencies in particular groups of individuals who then are targeted for specified forms of intervention and ‘removed’ from mainstream, generic work. This often has the effect that associational structures and opportunities for engagement are getting poorer. At the same time a particular focus on ‘recorded outcomes’ mitigates against the development and maintenance of relationships and relegates some of the core aspects of a developmental infrastructure to a secondary or unsupportable position.

A further issue arises from the close relationship between power, privilege and individuality. As Jane Thompson (2001) points out, individualism suits those who have choices and who have the resources to compete effectively. In a similar vein Bauman differentiates between individuality as a condition and individuality as a capacity (2001:58). Therefore those who are well equipped, i.e have the capacity, have little to gain from a social web but could potentially have a lot to lose within it. Communalism therefore could become the interest of ‘the weak’, attractive to those who experience

individuality as a condition without having the capacity to deal with it in practice. At this point the benefits of a complex infrastructure, supporting a complex motivational disposition, becomes most apparent as it provides the basis for also enfranchising 'the strong' in engagements based on mutuality and solidarity, with the capacity to retain its sustainability beyond immediate personal need.

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## Appendix I

### Information for Research Participants

#### What is the research about?

This is a piece of research about community involvement and adult learning.

The aim of the research is to find out why people become actively involved in their local communities and what support is available to them.

#### What will the research involve for you?

The method that will be used is a semi-structured interview. This means that you will be invited to talk about topics like

- What you currently do within your local community
- How you became involved
- Why you are involved in community activities.
- Your experience of adult learning

The interviewer will give you prompts to encourage you to talk about these subjects and may occasionally ask you direct questions. You can always choose how and whether you want to answer or how much detail you want to give.

The interview is likely to take about one hour. If you agree, the interview will be recorded on audio tape, or otherwise the interviewer will take notes.

Your participation in this research is very much appreciated, but entirely **voluntary**. You can withdraw at any time and also ask that the information that you may have already given will not be used.

All the information that you give is treated as **confidential**. This means that some of your words might be used directly as a quotation, but your identity will not be revealed to anybody at any stage.

#### Who is the researcher?

The researcher is a community and youth worker who is currently teaching community and youth work at Sunderland University, whilst also studying for a doctorate in Education.

#### What will the research be used for?

This piece of research is part of course leading to a Doctorate in Education at the University of Durham. If you agree, some of the transcripts from these interviews might be used for teaching purposes in the training of community and youth workers – again without revealing your identity.

**If you have any further questions** please contact;

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*Thank you very much for your help with this.*

## Appendix II

### Consent Form

#### Research into collective community involvement / learning

Have you read the 'Information for Research Participants'? Yes / No

Have you received enough information about the study? Yes/ No

Who have you spoken to? \_\_\_\_\_

Are you happy to take part in the study? Yes / No

Do you agree to the interview being recorded on audio tape ? Yes / No  
(your information will be kept anonymous)

Do you agree to the material being used for teaching purposes? Yes / No  
(without revealing your identity)

Do you understand that you can withdraw at any time without Yes / No  
having to give a reason?

Name in Block Letters \_\_\_\_\_

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

### Appendix III – Sample Details

1.	Male white 29 single disabled	Community Music Project Red Cross volunteer
2.	Male white 20 single student	Youth Assembly Chair Youth Organisations Council
3.	Male white 23 single children's rights worker	Trustee Youth Council Voluntary worker Youth Assembly, School Council Mentor
4.	Female white 39 married 3 children at home ex primary school teacher	Credit Union Collection point Treasurer Church group 'Justice and Peace' Group
5.	Male white 53 2 children self employed	Chair of Credit Union School Governor, (Cooperative Movement Peace Action Friends of the Earth)
6.	Female white 84 widowed living by herself	Runs 'Evergreens Club' for older women at local community centre
7.	Female white 67 divorced	History Group and Restoration group at local community centre. Chair of Community centre management committee

8.	Female white 36 parent employed civil servant	Volunteer instructor in an Outdoor Education Project Now also training to be a youth worker
9.	Female white 66 single retired	Secretary volunteer- founder member Active Age North East
10.	Male white 69 widowed retired	Volunteer- founder member Active Age North East Also organises walking groups for older people at a local community centre
11.	Female white 58	Active member of local community centre Founder member Family Camping group Food cooperative Runs courses in child safety Playgroup leader Girl guide
12	Female white 37 2 children	Community café Food cooperative
13.	Female white 17 Single parent	Date Rape campaign group
14	Female Black / Asian 50 Married Children	Refugee and Asylum Seekers Support Group Women's Education group Interfaith group
15	Female white 63 married	Volunteer driver Mentor for young people leaving care
16	Female white 52	Community Drama Group Writers Group Secretary for community association

17	Female white 18 single parent	Young women's safety campaign Volunteer St John's Ambulance Volunteer visitor for older people
18	Male white 17	Volunteer Youth Cub
19	Female white 48	Community Drama Group
20	Male Black / Asian 86 widowed	Ethnic minority support group Asylum seekers and refugee support group Secretary for community association Interfaith Group



## **Appendix IV**

### **Gateshead Council Adult Learning 2004 Identifying Best Practice in Community Learning**

#### **SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS**

- Gateshead Council's approach to community learning makes an effective contribution to the key elements of strategies relating to neighbourhood renewal and regeneration.
- Youth and Community Learning is particularly effective in attracting learners who are under-represented in adult learning, by providing learning opportunities which arise from or are linked to participation in community based activities.
- Gateshead Council's Adult Learning Service delivers a flexible mix of informal learning, individual mentoring, peer support and access to locally delivered, accredited learning that allows learners to develop 'joined-up' learning pathways.
- Adult learners receive a comprehensive package of support, which takes account of their physical and instrumental needs and also increases confidence and self esteem.
- There is an extensive infrastructure of groups and organisations that allows for community leadership skills to be acquired and practised at a range of different levels.
- Skills are successfully embedded through being shared with peers and applied for community benefit.
- The opportunities for the practice and development of community leadership provide a solid basis for the capacity of local people to make an effective and informed contribution to shaping local services and participation in local democracy.
- The learning opportunities generated around volunteering roles are particularly effective in widening participation, the development of skills and increased employment opportunities.
- The combination of learning and community involvement based on mutuality and collective action generates the mixture of skill and values that are required for increased social capital.
- The success of Gateshead Council's Adult Learning Service in attracting a very wide range of participants to its community based provision and into adult learning groups provides a good opportunity for learning about diversity, promoting tolerance, trust and social cohesion.
- All Youth and Community Learning staff work within the same nationally accredited professional framework, providing a baseline for professional practice that is firmly rooted in community development principles.
- The very good use and development of local skill and expertise builds on Gateshead residents' strength, is an effective tool in regeneration and renewal and ensures that services take account of local concerns.